



バッカーノ!

1934 婴婆編

Alice In Jails

BAKKANO!

成田良悟

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電撃文庫

About LAMIA

Adele's faltering explanation to Tim

You...you want to know about the Lamia?

Um...yes, I'm part of them as well...basically, we're a little different from normal humans. Of course there are individual differences between us, but as a whole, many of us don't get any older after a certain point...yes, it's because most of us are homunculi.

But...um...no, that's not quite right...

Other than that we don't age in the same way, we aren't so different from ordinary humans. If we get stabbed through the heart with a knife, take a bullet in the head, or if we're strangled, we'd still die.

But...um...no, that's not right either...

Generally speaking...there's no way for us to live normally anymore...um...ever since the time we began our existence in Master Huey's laboratory...

...

Back then, all we were...we were common test subjects, that's all...when we were poked and prodded by this and that machine, when we were made to endure various kinds of pain...we didn't know what they were for...and we were almost never told why...

All of us...all of us are broken...some of us went insane. And the ones who are left...maybe we're driving ourselves to insanity.

Every one of us...we all try to distance ourselves from the people of normal society, and try to be different...maybe that's because...if we think of ourselves as being the same as humans, there would be no way for us to accept our fate...

Christopher...Chi...Leeza...Sham...Hilton...and the others, others that you haven't met, Tim, like Rail, Frank, the Poet, and Sickle, and finally me. The Lamia who "survived"...that's all of us...from a certain point of view, we're all crazy. Is it our delusion? Or are we really insane? There's no way for us to even know about ourselves...

...but...but I like it this way...all of us together.

Because they're the only ones who are like me, and the only ones who make me feel like there are others who share a common existence as me...

...but who knows, maybe this bond is part of Master Huey's calculations...

But at least for me, I'm grateful for such calculations.

Because there's no way to know whether...whether this bond is real or fake.

About Christopher

Monologue from a certain man

Don't bother asking who I am, pal. No point being a stickler for the small stuff, right?

Hm, you wanted info on that incomplete homunculus that Huey Laforet created, didn't you?

Yeah, own up and thank me. I'm telling you 'cuz I don't mind telling you.

He is Huey's crowning achievement, and also his greatest failure. The fellow's perfectly unnatural, you see, but he still admires the ways of nature.

Hey, I don't mean he's going to run off stark naked somewhere and live like a caveman. Quite the contrary. He actually knows that he's essentially unnatural - maybe that's why he tries to lead such an outlandish life. Yeah, real fascinating. He's mad, and happily so. There are no rules guiding his actions and no values either - just his madness. He's quite proud of it. Maybe he thinks it's proof that he was never normal to begin with. But that's just it. When he tries to look at what is natural in an objective way, he actually shows more genuine responses than natural humans. He's afraid, see - afraid that if he gets too close to the natural way of things, everything about him will be bared to the light. He longs for humanity, but then he's afraid of becoming human! Although he hankers after friendship with all his heart, the worry that he'll never have true friendship really gnaws on his heart too.

Ain't it funny? It's really too much! Hilarious!

He's got enormous strengths, but also such weaknesses, and trials he can't endure. Really breaks your heart.

I'd like to know who exactly that Huey Laforet had in mind when he created such a singular and extraordinary being.

Was he based on Elmer? Or maybe the brothers Denkuro and Zank?

Anything else I might say would be beside the point, so c'mon, pay up. Out with the dough.

Well, hurry up, would you? You're slow, that's why I just managed to knife you. You've only got yourself to blame, okay?

Oh right, one last thing. This Christopher's probably the most human out of all the Lamia. But he's afraid of humanity, too, so that's why he's chosen to take on such an inhuman appearance, haha.

Man, can't believe you've already snuffed it. Comon, you've really got to work harder so that you can show Christopher the might of humanity!

Hahaha!

About Graham

Ladd's comments to the White suits

Graham, you say?

One word: mental.

There's nothing in his head except destruction.

Oh, I don't know, just like how some guys think about women all the time, or how I think about killing all the time, except Graham thinks about destroying things, awake or asleep. He'd probably still be thinking about it even at the edge of death.

He's not like me, though. He loathes killing, absolutely hates it. I think he said something at one point like, "Life is insubstantial, so taking it brings me no joy. I don't like it. I get nothing from it except feelings of guilt. So no, not for me." How about that? Ludicrous, don't you think?

Well, basically, whether it's people or machines, he sees them all as objects that will break down one day, so he doesn't feel the heat and gravity of life.

Hey, I do though! I really appreciate the heat, weight, and value of life, I appreciate their existence. I don't think they're insubstantial at all, so taking lives is my favourite thing to do.

Isn't it funny? Isn't it ironic? The kid Graham is based on a totally inverted logic from me, and he's totally amoral. But actually, he would never kill anyone.

It's because of this that other members of the Russo family used to call him a coward and such things. What idiots! Whether he kills or not has nothing to do with bravery and cowardice.

And those goons who laughed at him? Graham dislocated every joint in their bodies. While he was at it, he looked like he was having the time of his life. Yep, the expression on his face was absolute bliss.

And then those goons wanted revenge and were planning to do him in, so in the end I had them breathe their last. Ha!

About Renée

Unpublicized conversations of Karil Muybridge, Nebula Company Chairman

Renée? Uh, which Renée do you mean?

Oh, the doll in Development Unit Six of the Pharmaceutical Department. Yes, I'm very familiar with her then.

Her full name is...um, I think it's Renée Palamedes Branvillier. A mouthful and hard to remember, don't you think?

But she isn't bad, is she? With such a nice figure. She looks so scholarly but her figure's so...sexy, is that the word? Sensual? It's sure to make one imagine all kinds of things.

...Huh? Oh, right, right, okay, you have other business. I was mistaken – I thought someone wanted to hold a beauty pageant at our company again. Well then, see you.

Hm? You want to ask about something else?

All right, let's put it this way. If you're here for other matters, I advise you not to approach her. I'm being quite serious. She's currently conducting research on the Elixir of Immortality, and there have been rumours that she's kidnapping people to use in human experiments. To tell the truth, I'm at a loss about what to do. We have no evidence right now, and so there no way we can intervene. On top of everything, she's immensely popular with our male employees, so I can't easily fire her or relocate her to another division.

Yes, I have a rough idea of everything she's up to! Like that case in New York where 1200 people went missing.

Yes, I suppose you can say that I'm using her, but who's to say that we're not all lab rats to her too? We shall see, when the time comes, who really holds the reins. Hey, do you want to join in on the bet? One outcome is that in the end I'm the one being used and I'm even now walking to my doom, and the other one is that she's going to make everything enormously interesting while under my clever control.

I had all the employees make this bet, and after tallying their responses, the tally is roughly 99:1. That's a 99% chance that I'm going to be defeated. It looks like I'm really not worthy of their respect.

But that just goes to show how much faith they have in her.

Epilogue II: The Vice-President Returns Triumphant

“Mr. Vice President! We’ve arrived! Get up! Hurry! Hurry!”

Pennsylvania Station, New York.

This was the final stop on the transcontinental railway, at America’s eastern-most city. Incongruously, a cute voice rang out from the steel and iron train compartment.

“Hey, passengers have to get off first, you know! If you overslept, you’d be towed back out west, and the President is bound to laugh at you for that. Mr. Nicholas will act all sarcastic, Mr. Henry will scorn you, brooding Mr. Elean will go into one of his depressive episodes, and finally Miss Rachel will start skipping out on tickets again!”

The train was an opulently furnished, powerful machine, and looked like it had seen many winters. Out of it burst the owner of the canary voice, a young girl.

The train station wasn’t very crowded at the moment, but people still moved about ceaselessly. The footsteps of the crowds saw no pause as they moved each person to his or her destination.

Upon descending the train, the girl only stood turning circles, uncertain about where to go.

She looked no more than fifteen and gave off an aura that matched her small and delicate figure. However, there was something around her neck that interrupted this image – a reporter’s camera. The contrast it produced made her seem even younger.

The camera was no toy. Its black and silver Leica camera body gave the cute girl an air of gravity.

She was singing a string of “lalala~’s and waiting for her companion to get off the train. Just as she turned enough circles to become dizzy, the man she was waiting for appeared.

“Don’t be in such a rush, Carol.” An adult man descended from the carriage, his piercing eyes flashing on all those present.

At first glance he seemed young, but there was silver in his hair, so it was difficult to say how old he was. He wore a monocle over his left eye, and the eye behind the lens was as sharp as an eagle’s.

The monocle was so bright that it seemed less a lens and more like a mirror. A distorted image of the station interior shone on its convex surface.

The cut of his clothes was expensive. The brand-name clothes on his back and the umbrella and accoutrements slung over a nearby seat all radiated sophistication and made him seem like the head of an aristocratic household. His sharp gaze, however, made him seem slightly villainous, and altogether his incongruous image left a strong impression on those who saw him.

“Oh, there you are, Sir! You’re such a slowpoke!”

She greeted her companion with a big, unaffected smile. “I couldn’t wait a second longer! This trip’s been so long it’s almost pushed our story out of my head!”

“Ah, Carol, if we humans have a pre-ordained number of heartbeats to our lives, then your palpitations in your excitement would surely shorten your lifespan. So, please contain yourself.”

“Pooh! I don’t care for rules like containing myself. As reporters, our lives are determined by how fast we provide stories to the public. So I can’t wait to get back to the press and get things organized.” With this, the girl started walking away, as if she really couldn’t wait a second longer.

“Hmm...is that so? Our lives are determined by speed? The highest you can get for this theory is 2648 points.”

“...out of how many?”

The man ignored the girl’s anxious stare and continued. “I would tell you, Carol, that our lives as journalists are based rather on the accuracy of our information, but in reality, that might not be true either. Reporting rumours can sometimes be sufficient, and sometimes rumours even sell better. What are important is intuition, fortune, and vitality. We are comprised of bodies and souls; we live through the heartbeats and brainwaves of the populace. What determines our lives as reporters are exactly what determines the lives of any other human being. This perspective is not wrong, necessarily, but it is not the best conclusion we can draw. Therefore, the highest you can get on this avenue of thinking is 2649 points.”

“I’m just one point short...? All right, never mind then. I need to get back to the press real fast and start cultivating the essence of humanity and whatnot that you were just talking about.”

Carol waved as if to dismiss the topic, but then her attention was suddenly caught by something behind the vice president. “Hmm...? Weird...this isn’t right.” Her voice was filled with puzzlement.

“What is it, Carol? As a lady, it is rude to point.” The vice president jabbed his index finger at Carol with one hand and adjusted his monocle with the other.

Carol still looked puzzled. “Um...how should I put this...Sir, it was just you and me doing all the interviews on this assignment, right?”

“Mm-hmm. You can say that on this assignment, you have accompanied me most. But I deduce that for you to single out this simple fact and from where your gaze falls that something has happened behind me. Well, go on.”

“...Um...”

Carol hesitated for a moment, and directed a question not at the vice president, but someone standing behind him.

“Pardon me, but may I ask who you are?”

The person was almost pushed right up against the vice president. She gave a low laugh, and her clear, distinct voice seemed to come from all around them.

“Hello.”

“Uh...”

“Should I say ‘It is nice to meet you’ or should I say ‘How good to see you again’?”

The vice president twisted his neck around to see a woman standing behind him. She looked like any other woman riding the train, with a similar simple smile. But she was verbose and seemed to have prepared a

script. "You must be the vice president of the Daily Days, correct? Or ought I call you an information broker? Mr. Gustav St. Germain...though I have suspicions that this isn't really your name."

It was inconceivable that a woman who suddenly appeared could identify him so accurately. Carol felt a little alarmed and stepped back to hide in the vice president's shadow, but Gustav St. Germain remained as immutable as a mountain.

"You are correct on both accounts, Miss. As for my name, think what you like. But I must humbly ask what brings you to meet with us, and we will respond according to how you respond."

The vice president straightened his back in almost a lazy manner, adjusted his collar with one hand and at last turned to fully face the strange woman with a very formal countenance.

The woman had a soft smile on her face, and quietly acknowledged that her information had been correct - the information identifying these two individuals as information brokers.

"I have heard that you...the information brokers at the Daily Days, can get your hands on all manners of intelligence."

"Yes, that's right. We're information brokers, after all. We hold that intelligence is the payment for passage and holds great monetary value, that information is the basis of our society, and by itself information constitutes an absolute measurement of value. The price may fluctuate according to the customer, and according to the buyer, information can change its nature. This is the difficult matter we deal in, and to tell the truth, it's hard business. But no matter whether it is scandals, fame, whispers told in alleys or the word on the street, gossip, or fantastic tales, as long as the customers so desires, we can provide it, even if the information had previously never seen the light of day or even if it is mere rumours. And so, Miss, I daresay you have something to ask - perhaps you are to become one of our cherished customers."

The vice president finished off his long, testimonial-like speech with a solicitous enough question, but there was no graciousness in his eyes, as if he had seen right through the woman.

The woman did exactly as he had expected. Her soft smile didn't change. Her movements seemed otherworldly as she reached into a bag and pulled out an object of shiny black metal and aimed it at the vice president's chest.

"I repeat: 'It is nice to meet you' or 'How good to see you again'?"

"Huh...? Oh my!" Upon seeing the gun, Carol's face filled with panic.

However, the vice president didn't react at all to a weapon pointed at him. His expression was still smooth. "I understand that we should have known that if we equate information with monetary value, then one day we will be robbed. Well, seeing as you're not a customer, there is no need for us to be civil any longer."

"M...Mr. Vice President! What are you saying?" Carol was trembling nonstop and clutching her camera. The vice president stepped sideways to block Carol. When he spoke, his voice was still even.

"Well, Miss Robber. Why are you risking arrest by coming to steal information from us? Before we proceed any further, I'd at least like to know your name." He remained pleasant despite the gun pointed at his chest, but there was no good humour in his face.

By contrast, the woman was still smiling. The train station staff had not yet noticed the gun between her and St. Germain.

"I am Hilton, one of the Twins," she said matter-of-factly.

“Yes, I know of that. But compared with your name in your entirety, I would find a more specific name to be more helpful.” Likewise, his reply was also very direct.

Carol was still confused and clutching her camera.

There was a moment of silence between them, and then the woman who called herself Hilton shook her head. Her smile seemed to have frozen stiff.

“...so it is. It’s exactly this quality about you that I find intolerable.”

“Hmm?”

“Information brokers, information brokers, information brokers! It’s nothing can escape that title! It’s like it gives you the power to see through everything, the power to conquer the world! How much do you know? About us? About me?”

She did not seem truly very furious, but still gave off the sense that she could pull the trigger at any moment. St. Germain, however, seemed to be sunk in thought, and his next words seemed more to himself than anything else.

“Hmm...regarding how much information there is in our hands...this is not a question with a clear answer. Even we have no method to fathom how much. But if you ask ‘how much do you want to know,’ then my answer would be ‘I want to know everything.’”

The vice-president was pondering this in a half joking, half serious way, and continued speaking as though to himself.

“And as for how much we know, I’m not learned enough to tell you that. Except one sentence, which can perhaps answer the question ‘how much do you know.’ It would be ‘everything I can know.’ That’s all.”

“Please don’t insult me,” Hilton said. There was no smile on her face now. “You’ve just come from Chicago, right? There wasn’t a corner you didn’t scuttle off to. You were everywhere, almost like how we can be everywhere!”

“Ah, about this, Miss Robber, I must seek to correct you. I cannot be as you are and cover all ground. Conversely, we can also go where you cannot.”

Hilton clenched her teeth at this cryptic reply and tried to assume a deadpan expression. “Yes, that’s why I want to know,” she pursued. But she couldn’t seem to calm down and her voice grew strident again. “Master Huey’s left eye...why was it taken? What happened in places we didn’t go? Based on the information from Chicago and Alcatraz, it looks like you information brokers have already formed an alliance with them. Aren’t I right?”

Hilton took a few deep breaths and steadied her wavering aim.

Her anxiety wasn’t because she was afraid of pointing a gun at someone else, but because of frustration and indignation. Her steady gaze was the gaze of a person who had killed before. Not only the vice president but even Carol could feel that the threat she posed was quite real.

Carol was thinking that given the situation, it was unlikely that she would let them go unharmed, even if they told the woman the information that she wanted to know. However, the vice president just let out a small sigh and shook his head as if he were only slightly amazed at Hilton’s stupidity.

“I supposed that you have considered the possible results of your actions, have you not?”

“...what do you mean?”

“An information broker who is in fear of his life will one day break and give false intelligence. To escape death, he will lie through his teeth to say what his captors want to hear.”

“...” Hilton frowned in thought, but the gun did not move, and her finger never left the trigger.

Despite being in danger, the vice president still continued coolly and smoothly. “The information brokers at the Daily Days would never bend to threats and distort reality. But since you are essentially mugging me for information...well then, I won’t hesitate to tell you everything.”

“Mr. Vice-president, if you’re going to go along with it anyway, can’t you stop acting all haughty...?”

Carol looked up at her superior with an expression that said “What are you thinking?” However, Gustav St. Germain did not pay any attention to his assistant. Instead, he eyes blazed at Hilton.

“If we stay here, we will rouse the attention of the guards sooner or later, and it would cause a commotion. What do you say to relocating?”

“That was my intention from the beginning. Well, it looks like you never planned to escape. But I warn you, if you plan to struggle in any way...you know our ‘secret,’ so you know what would happen if you try anything.”

“I understand perfectly. Well, shall we? Though I must insist that you also be prepared.”

“Prepared?”

The vice-president’s words had just been very strange, and his next words were stranger still.

“Those unprepared and still want to forcibly extract information from others may meet an undesirable end. You might learn what you never wanted to know.” He spoke as if he had already seen through the woman who called herself Hilton, and knew exactly what would happen to her in the future. “Please remember this well – whatever end you meet after you come to possess this information – don’t come crawling back to me. There is nothing in an information broker’s job description that requires us to aid information robbers afterwards.”

After this weighty warning, the vice president continued more pleasantly than before. “All right. Let us consider what intelligence you already have as we walk. What you and the chess pieces called ‘Lamia’ did in Chicago and what you did not do...let us begin.”

“Let us slowly and unreservedly reveal all...”

Chapter 1: Prologues From Beyond Time

Prologue V: A Team of Heretics

It was quite an extraordinary group.

A certain day in a certain month, 1934

Chicago, Illinois

“Behold...the pale lamentation, as told by the patterns of rain.”

“The pale lamentation...behold, as it hails colours from the soul of the storm.”

A man with a fedora pulled low over his eyes was reciting low words to the wide waters.

“The gales from Lake Michigan seek again and again to stir Chicago awake. But who? Nameless it shall remain.”

His mysterious words were carried away by a wind off the waters and disappeared.

But he was correct – in many ways, Chicago was a city in the midst of a renaissance. New York and San Francisco were the two major cities on either side of the country and were linked by a railway line. And Chicago, which sat between them, had gradually developed into a location with a flourishing economy and culture. After Chicago began undergoing official development in the past decade, the construction of railways and canals began in earnest. Chicago became a major inland hub and its population slowly increased.

The rich land surrounding the city also became productive farmland and the area became a bread basket for America.

However, disaster struck Chicago in 1871.

The cause of the fires was never discovered. Perhaps it only started as a seemingly insignificant spark, but ended up mercilessly engulfing the entire city.

It was called the Great Chicago Fire afterwards, though the upside was that it prodded the rest of the country into setting up plans for disaster prevention. The fire raged for days, and in those days as many as two hundred and fifty people were killed, and hundreds of thousands of people were cast onto the streets.

There was no doubt that it was a terrible incident, but some believed that it was necessary for Chicago to be reborn.

(It would be a major headache if this happens again, so from now on, let's use inflammable building materials.)

This idea arose from the ashes of the wooden beams and thatch, and spurred the birth of buildings of steel and concrete.

The steel and concrete seemed to grow faster than plants sprouting, and in no time at all, a tall building was erected.

The Home Insurance Building.

Even though the building was pulled down in 1931, it had been the first skyscraper in the region, and so became the symbol and the standard for other similar buildings. It was as if the city really wanted to touch the sky.

And now, after lessons from the fire, Chicago implemented a large number of fire stations. The city flourished under their protection.

The Chicago Herald Tribune, which was one of the few major newspapers in America, made the Tribune Tower its home. With this tower at the fore, the city of Chicago grew to rival New York in its magnificent skyline.

This was what a big American city was like: a symbol in the history of American development.

The lake was still a symbol of nature. And between nature and civilization stood a man in a fedora, facing the strong winds coming off the lake surface. He stretched out his arms and opened his palms to the sky, swayed to and fro, and with this theatrical, almost operatic pose, began uttering words more affected than in any play or poem:

“What the wind brings Is parched plankton Are sands with secret sultry dews Is blinding light. Is bone-deep, searing cold. In all this lies our hope and our despair. Mayhap true power shall birth from the contrast of temperature.”

He finished this loud declaration, cupped his face in his hands, and began speaking to himself. “A contrast of temperature seems too prosaic... I wonder if a more resplendent expression exists?”

The rim of the hat hid the top half of his face in darkness, so it was impossible to see his eyes. But there were no wrinkles on the bottom half of his face, so one could see that he wasn’t an old man.

“Who can brave the flow of time, and come to me, this humble pilgrim, with the answer that I seek? Where are my comrades?”

This was directed behind him, but all was silent.

“I have already put forth my question, but why do you remain silent...? The unbroken stillness to my back metamorphoses into utter darkness and begins to nibble at my heels. Curses, curses! Oh, great lord, hear my cries. Silence seeks to disarm me, destroy me, devour me – OW!”

There was a sudden, heavy blow to the side of his head.

The stillness that he had been talking about seemed to have materialized into a spinning high kick. It was an attack that said a lot about the person behind it.

“Prosaic? Come on, it’s just a word. What’s surprisingly prosaic is your whole existence, Poet,” came an extremely sharp voice.

The person who had exhibited this martial move was a woman. There was undisguised annoyance in her face and her eyes were full of daggers as she looked at the man, who had dropped to his knees after being kicked and was massaging his temples.

She had a cold, calm gaze, and was the sort of person whom a scowl suited better than a smile. She seemed to be about twenty years old and her features were quite attractive, but the coldness in her eyes erected a wall between her and those around her.

In addition, although her word use wasn't uncouth by any means, something in her tone was extremely unladylike. The man she had called "Poet" once said, "What would approximate your existence would be if the most favoured musket of a serial killer was possessed by a goddess."

However, she was dressed in quite a feminine way and had flowing golden hair, and this made her seem like woman of high standing. With a few more accessories, it wouldn't be too much to say that she looked like an aristocratic heiress.

But from this young woman emanated a chilly voice. "Listen up, Poet. Master Huey said that we need to avoid attracting attention before the operation starts, remember?"

The Poet looked back at the icy girl with golden hair. "You need not remind me. Perhaps you believed that your inherent oppositional nature and your masculine deportment choosing my head as the dance floor might have made my memories forsake me, yet my memories remain steadfast. Master Huey's edicts are as the messenger birds of Mnemosyne, and form an intimate part of my inner being."

The woman glared at the man and his incomprehensible words, and only said, "You know what I was thinking when you were carrying on just then?"

"Oh, Oh! Lord, lord! Two demonic beings appear before me, grinding their upon the Earth, and tell me this: 'Thou must begin a dance of blood and tears.' In other words, there is no answer valid before your sudden choler. A tragedy...it is a tragedy."

"You got the pissed off part right, but the correct answer would be 'die and go to hell.' Or in your words, it might be 'Mayst thou burn in the tormenting flames of Tartarus.'"

"Your naked words are such an assault upon the soul! And it is most foul when you choose to speak by the way of assault!"

"You're really something, you know. Calling to some "lord" when you clearly don't believe in God. Don't you have any idea of normal people behave?"

At this challenge, the man stood up immediately. "Quite the contrary! The headless doll with the broken wings has said thus: 'it is precisely because I don't believe in gods that they descend upon me, enable my cultivation, and compel me to cry out to them!'"

"Sorry, I find 130% of what you just said totally meaningless."

"Come now, do you really want to challenge me in the realm of philosophy? Greater than a hundred percent is an intractable contradiction. From which world hails the extraneous thirty percent?"

"A third of that is your head, another third is the meaning of your existence, and the last third is to make up 130 % and mess up your mind."

It was an outright insult, but the Poet and nodded. "Yes, I understand."

A smile appeared on his face.

A split second later, he flung out his arms in an even more exaggerated fashion than before, gazed into the heavens, and puffed out his chest so much that it looked as if his backbone was in danger of bending and snapping. "Oh, god, god! Rain guilt upon them! Let me be the judge of their crimes! Do this and I shall

stone them with the flaming rocks by the roadside, and quench my parched throat with the dregs of guilt that wells from their punishment!"

From the woman came an annoyed, though perhaps accurate description. "You're a lunatic."

Just then, another voice came from behind her.

"Oh, gee, he's at it again."

"Sickle, you should have realized. If a woman gives such an accomplished kick like that, that would attract attention too."

One voice was low and deep and the other was high. Sickle turned her head slightly towards the source of the voices. "Rail, Frank, you guys are so slow."

"Can't help it. We stand out even if we don't want to. I might be able to wrap a scarf around my face, but there's no way Frank can disguise himself at all."

"S...sorry."

Out of the two figures that Sickle was glaring at, one just smiled and shrugged, while the other tensed and looked scared.

The one who tensed up, whom Sickle called Frank, looked like he was a few times taller than the figure called Rail.

Rail looked like a short young man, and Frank looked sort of like he was toddler, except that he was many time bigger than a toddler. At a casual glance, he was probably over two metres tall, but it wasn't that his body was elongated. Rather, his head was proportionally quite big, like a toddler's would be. He was also very wide, though one couldn't tell whether it was mostly fat or muscle. Overall, he looked like a beer barrel with arms, legs, and a head attached.

As for Rail, he looked like he was dressed like any other street kid. Something about his figure made him look like a doll or mannequin that was alive, and he gave off a cool, distant aura. Other than his figure, though, he had a particularity that rivalled Frank's.

It was the fact that his skin bore numerous alarming scars left from stitches. The parts of his skin that was exposed looked like a map, crisscrossed by train tracks.

The skin under his clothes was probably like this as well. Likewise, his face bore a long, horizontal scar in addition to another one running down from his temple. Scars also began at the corners of his lips. There was a strong contrast between his young, smooth skin and his scars, and the scars seemed to pull his mouth into a self-deprecating smile.

It almost seemed as if a child had taken a knife and mutilated her doll in a fit of jealousy.

The mannequin-like young man smiled at the barrel-like one. "You have no idea how hard it was to get here. If Frank is discovered, then it's over. It's not like he can take the passenger train, so we could only transfer from one cargo train to the next, and then we had to walk several miles."

"S...sorry."

"Hey, no need to apologize, Frank! If anyone's to blame, it's Huey. He's the one who made us come to a place like this, and he's the one who made us so...distinctive, right? What a freak! He's definitely playing around with us for his amusement!"

Although there was a smile on his face, he was cursing the man who everyone else had been calling “Master.”

Frank had shifted his gaze away uncomfortably during Rail’s outburst. The Poet opened his arms in a seemingly sympathetic gesture, and began pouring out thanks to his unnamed deity. “Behold, god will soon cast you into guilt! One young member of our demonic forces would even think to present the apple of Lilith to our dear leader, Master Huey, bringer of love and peace, who represents absolute law and fate! Do you believe such coarse words will move god? All of us shall be guilty by association, our every step brings us closer to death! Carve my soul upon my headstone, Sickle oo ouch oww –”

His throat was pinned by a lightning kick, and the Poet yowled and clawed at his chest. Sickle only looked on with a deadpan as her comrade clutched alternately at his chest and hat in pain, and turned. “Great, the Poet will take your punishment for you.”

She sighed at the two new arrivals. “Ignore him. But you really have no sense of loyalty towards Master Huey, do you.”

“And what are you gonna do about it? Tattle on me? Maybe I’ll be killed for it! Ahahaha!”

“Master Huey wouldn’t waste his precious time killing you, and he probably knows about your rebelliousness anyway.”

“Right, I suppose so. That’s one thing about him that pisses me off! Ahahaha!” Rail laughed, but there was a shadow in his eyes. It looked like Rail really hated Huey and didn’t bother to hide it.

“Okay, so what’s up today? A Lamia get-together?”

“There’s still Leeza and Chi. Adele’s still working as Tim’s bodyguard, and Christopher is still missing.”

“Really? Chris hasn’t been found yet?”

Rail sounded surprised, but Sickle’s explanation was calm. “Not even the Twins’ network detected Christopher in the past year. You’d better be prepared for the worst.”

“...I see...” Rail’s face darkened at Sickle’s blunt news. But a smile still lingered at the corner of his lips – perhaps the scar really fixed his lips into this shape.

The broody atmosphere was broken by a strident voice which seemed totally ignorant of the situation. It seemed that the Poet had finally recovered his speech. “Faint light pervades the dusk; the darkness of night arrests all of time. It is amazing that we live for tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, which crawls in this petty pace from day to day, awaiting the moment then we may surpass the instantaneous. Then? Ah, and then? I am not weary, yet it is the irrational fate that falls which wearies me. How far must one float through the river of time before one is met by what one pines for? How many rivers of time must we dam before we could navigate the river of fate?”

“Oh, shut up, Poet,” said Sickle, annoyed. “I’ve said so a million times. Your rants are an insult to poetry.”

Rail couldn’t understand what the Poet had said at all, and grinned at Sickle. “What’d he say?”

“He meant that he’s sick of waiting.”

“Wow, you’re really a genius, Poet, if you can make something so simple into an obscure speech like that! Though, all in all, you’re still a freak.”

The Poet only shook his head, and walked towards Rail and put a hand lightly on his shoulder.

“Hm? What are you doing, Poet?”

“Listen, Rail. Language is powerful, whether it are written or spelled out with gestures. It is a miraculous achievement to put one’s thoughts into words and have them correctly understood.”

It was a surprise that the Poet was using comparatively normal words for a change, but because the rim of his hat still covered his eyes, it was difficult to guess what he really meant.

“Language can express the world in all its entirety. Perhaps a picture is worth a thousand words, but a thousand words can still describe the scene that one sees before him, ten thousand words can subvert the coming of dusk, and a hundred thousand words can reshape the fabric of the world.”

“.....”

“Language is a kind of power. One needs only believe in its power, and let its passion fill you! But I still don’t have enough power, and my words can’t affect the physics of the world. Therefore – if you are willing, use your physical power for me and blow up Sickle, then as thanks I will teach you a verse that will give happiness to the world OW OW OW –”

“Don’t listen to him. He’s trying to use you.”

The Poet was again being throttled by Sickle. It seemed that his bones would dislocate, but Rail didn’t seem to think much of this, and instead seemed regretful. “Ah...the Poet doesn’t often talk in a way I can understand, so I kinda wanted to keep listening.”

Sickle smiled bitterly. “I don’t think I can take being blown up.” Then she looked around her. “According to our plans, Leeza should be here pretty soon.”

A few men were surveying this group from afar.

“Is that them?”

Three men were hidden in the woods some distance away from the lake shore.

“Right on and no mistake. They look exactly like the wanted posters.”

One man with binoculars looked at the giant figure of Frank yawning and smirked. “Bingo. Can’t mistake that big rolley-polley one for nobody else.” Then he shifted his attention to the one beside him. “Hm, the kid’s got scars on him like train tracks all right. Though it’s hard to know for sure about the other two.”

“Whatever. If they ain’t on other ones n the posters, then too bad. I say we get’em.”

“If we got it wrong, then it just ain’t their lucky day.”

“You got it.”

The men were dressed in trench coats and wore fedoras on their heads, but this wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. But the atmosphere around them hinted that they weren’t ordinary people, but gangsters. For one thing, they had been discussing criminal topics in a casual and laughing manner.

The man with the binoculars looked particularly distinctive in this regard. He had a shiny new scar across his face, as if he had recently been slashed by a knife.

The laughter disappeared from the face of another man. "So, what's the plan? Do we go and get them now?" He looked at the group gathered around the giant like a shark looking at prey.

"Nah...wait a bit and see. They ain't mere carny freaks. Word is that they're a pretty fierce bunch even for underlings of that Huey dude." There was still a slight smirk on the face of the man with the binoculars, and his voice didn't seem as tense as that of his companion. "Let's calls some boys over. If we manage to bag them..."

A sudden voice interrupted them.

"If you do, then what?"

The inexplicable voice of a girl came out of nowhere, and the man lowered his binoculars and spun around.

But there was no sign of any women around at all.

On the other hand, the two companions who were behind him had disappeared.

"What...?"

His heart began thudding madly and he was enveloped by fear.

This was difference from how his companions had tensed up. This came from a deep-rooted fear of his life. Cold sweat drenched his back. He tried to quash down his fear to better deal with what was happening.

At the same time, he discovered something.

There were two figures lying on the ground. A moment ago, they had been chatting with him.

As he continued to lower his gaze, he realized that his companions had already lost consciousness.

The two men were lying face-down, and there were strange round things in their heads. They were discs, like a horrible version of an angel's halo. There was no blood, but they were just lodged in the back of their heads.

The man stared, uncomprehending, and swallowed. Just then, a male voice spoke.

"Who are you?"

He spun around to be faced with several shiny blades.

Through the space between the blades, he saw a man with swept-back hair. From his black hair, yellow skin, and the way he was dressed, he looked like someone from the East.

The Asian man sighed as if in sympathy, and with a kind of pity in his eyes, pressed the blades closer.

"It looks like the unlucky ones are you."

"Just so~."

“Sorry to keep you waiting~!”

Sickle and the Poet didn’t seem alarmed at all to hear a girl’s voice come out of nowhere.

“Yes, Leeza, we’ve been waiting for a long time. So it’s your fault I had to listen to the spiel that this one calls poetry.”

“Oh, the voice born from darkness, have you come to deliver the honey of poison apples? The time is ripe, and flows to the sea of despair, the sea of despair! Poison breeds in the overripe flesh of the fruit, and shall corrupt our brains before long. Oh, lackaday...as to a full moon of fury, despair eclipses all without a trace.”

“Isn’t saying ‘You’re late’ enough?” The voice of the girl called Leeza still echoed around them, though she was still nowhere to be seen.

But the Asian man appeared and glared at the Poet. “I guess you haven’t dropped that way of talking at all. You’ve gotten worse since Christopher disappeared.”

“Christopher! Oh, to date only this man has a soul which strikes a harmony with my own! Despite his ungodly habit of putting my poetry into song, but it means that my words have penetrated to the depths of his heart!”

“...never mind. I’ll shut up if you shut up.”

“Don’t mind him, Chi. The more he talks, the duller he’d get.”

The Asian man called Chi, Hong Chi Mei, gave an exasperated sigh. “All right. Let’s set this aside. Everyone look at this.” So saying, he took a piece of paper.

“And what’s this?”

“It looks like it’s got our names on it.” Rail peered at the paper with interest, and Frank, who was so much higher off the ground, craned his neck to look.

The paper was filled with physical descriptions of the two of them, and there was even a rough illustration of Frank.

“No, really, what is this?”

“There were a few men spying on you from the woods back there, and they had these on them.”

There were a few bloody blotches on the paper, but since Chi hadn’t brought these men over to the rest of the group, the rest of them didn’t know what happened to them.

Sickle frowned. “You did ask them who they were before you attacked them, right?”

“I just threatened one of them, but then he voluntarily sliced his own throat on my blades. It was an accident.”

“And they didn’t have any identification on them, either. If we’d known that, we’d have waited a bit until they called their friends,” the disembodied voice added.

The only thing that the group did upon hearing that they had been under surveillance was to glance at one another. The only one who looked nervous was Frank.

“...so what should we do? If there’s people watching us?”

Rail, on the other hand, grinned so widely that his face looked lopsided. “Isn’t it more fun this way? It’s not like old Huey wanted us to do anything immediately.”

“Correct.” Leeza’s voice, coming from all sides, was likewise cheerful. “He hasn’t decided between here and New York yet. It depends on which bait the FBI takes. It looks like they’re about to take the bait in New York, but then there’s the question of Senator Beriam and Nebula.”

“What? Wait a sec, you mean, if something goes wrong we might not see any action at all?”

“Yep, but then again, your situation is different from Tim’s. The police don’t know your faces yet, so it’s more likely to happen here. But...”

“But?”

“Well, that’s why this wanted poster is such a problem.” Leeza’s voice was low and serious. “If there was only Rail and Frank on here, then it can be explained by an accidental sighting somewhere. But it’s got Sickle, the Poet, and Chi too, and it’s also got other teams like Lamia, so that’s Tim and them, and Rhythm, and Time.”

“So, what do you mean? Beriam knows what we look like and other people do too?”

“If I knew what’s going on, it wouldn’t be a problem. It might come to us being the bait and Tim and the New York team going ahead with the operation.”

None of them could see Leeza and hence didn’t know what her expression was, but the gravity in her voice made them all think the worst. Sickle looked extremely unhappy about the way things stood, and even the Poet was silent.

However, Rail was still smiling, and took a cylinder from his pockets. It was about the length and thickness of a finger. He wrapped the wanted poster around it, made an action as if pulling something, and then threw it towards the lake.

The cylinder was carried into the sky in a graceful arc and landed on the surface of the water.

“Whatever. When they show up, whoever it is, we can just blow them up. Simple as that.”

As he spoke, a blinding flash of light burst from the lake and engulfed the dark surface. The sound of an explosion came a moment later. The explosion created rippling waves in the water, and the smell of gunpowder washed over the shore.

The wanted poster that Rail had just blown up might have been a clue, but no one called Rail out on it. They looked a little surprised at what he did, but knew that it wasn’t like they could get fingerprints from the paper or anything.

Chi shook his head. “Amazing. It looks like your craft has improved quite a bit.”

“Ahaha. Pity, I didn’t make this.”

“Hm?”

“I found these circulating among Hollywood filmmakers, so I bought the lot. I heard the one who sold it to them was a young street kid my age. Whatever. It’s not important who made it.”

“.....”

Seeing that Chi was silent, Rail showed a wry smile. “It’s not like I planned to be remembered throughout history or anything.”

Chi was still silent at this comment, and Rail turned as if nothing had happened and began walking back towards the city.

“If the operation starts, tell the Twins to let me know. I’m gonna do some of my own stuff before that.”

Frank hurried after him nervously. “Hey, wait, wait a second, Rail. It’s too dangerous to go by yourself.”

“That’s right, and there’s three dead bodies in the woods too. Do you mind getting rid of them?”

“...Haha! You know, asking a kid to get rid of corpses totally suck. No wonder my personality’s becoming more and more twisted.”

“Twistedness is a virtue~. I don’t need you to thank me, Rail. So. The corpse disposal job’s all yours.”

“Oh, Leeza, I like you oh so much.” Rail’s laughter sounded like a sigh as he walked off, and only raised a hand in answer to Leeza’s request.

Chi watched him disappear. “Hm. Rail’s becoming more and more similar to Christopher, isn’t he.”

“Yeah, the kid hates Master Huey so much, but then he’s so close to Christopher.”

Chi thought of Christopher and couldn’t help make a face. “I wonder what that idiot’s up to now...”

The expression on his face seemed to say that even if Christopher wasn’t present at the moment, Chi refused to believe that he could be gone forever.

Leeza went onto another topic as if to prove that she had nothing to do with Christopher. “All right. Everyone’s in the city now...and I’ll let you know about the details of this operation through the Twins. Before it starts, you can do what you like, but be careful of the guys with the wanted posters, okay?”

Everyone who was present nodded at Leeza’s serious tone, but only the Poet once again raised his hand to the skies and launched into another proclamation.

“How perfectly wonderful! From this day, this moment forth, I shall await the lofty commands of Master Huey. When we all hear the undeniable call to action, the colours of this city and the colours of all the world shall change as we dye the world! Ah, ah, ah! Is this sanctity? Is it woe? I call out to all those still sealed and blinkered in your own ignorance! Stay in your incomprehensible prisons, and wait as you witness the universe rewritten!”

“This guy’s enough to make you lose control and kill him.”

“If he infects you, you won’t even be able to tell the difference between lunacy and normality.”

“Please, Mr. Poet~ I have only one request. Can you shut up? Like forever?”

As each person threw one last jibe at the Poet, they drifted off, and the Poet was left alone in the stillness.

He made sure that Leeza’s presence was gone before he began musing to himself.

“What shall this world become as anomalies such as us and Master Huey sink into the fabric of the world? Perhaps it is Never-never Land? Or a Tartarus filled with shades of the dead? No...no one knows. Hence, the best setting for those imprisoned...”

The Poet pulled his hat lower over his face as he contemplated the fate of the city, as if he meant to mourn its future.

“...is, most simply, Alice in Wonderland.”

Meanwhile...

“...?”

Rail, leading the giant Frank into the woods, stopped.

“Weird...there aren’t any bodies.”

His words vanished into the masses of vegetation, and there was no reply.

There was no scent of blood on the wind blowing from the lake. All that was the warm, humid air, placidly flowing around him.

Prologue VI: The Mobsters Return

(An abandoned factory, Chicago suburbs)

“Ah...how tragic...let me tell you a very very sad story.”

Chicago became one of the busiest manufacturing centres as the automobile industry took off. Various factories sprang up like vegetation after spring showers, and as the demand for employees grew, the population of those working in the factories exploded. Not everything went smoothly, though. White and Black employees received different recompenses for their labour and conflicts often broke out between the two groups. However, the industry still encircled the city in a ring of iron grey.

A factory or garage filled with rust and gasoline was typical of this time. And in such a place sat a young man.

He was about twenty years old, and lounged upon the chassis part of a large vehicle, sighing.

At first glance he seemed to be one of the factory employees, since he was dressed in a blue work uniform. But the colour of his uniform was an extremely bright blue, which wouldn't be seen in regular uniforms. It would attract a lot of attention if he walked the city streets.

What was strange wasn't just the uniform, but what the young man was playing around with in his hand. It was a wrench.

At this, most people would nod and think that all right, so here's a factory worker with his wrench. But there were two special things about the wrench.

One was its size.

The young man didn't have a large build, but the wrench in his hands looked like it was longer than a person's forearm. It was a work tool, but a more accurate description would be that it resembled a pole arm from the Middle Ages.

Second –

The surface of the wrench, which originally should have been a polished silver, was covered with dark blood.

His head of golden hair covered half of his face, and the eye that peaked out from beneath his bangs was half open, as if he was drifting off to sleep. The young man looked quiet and placid enough, but he had solid muscles.

From his golden hair and fair skin, he looked like a very beautiful young gentleman, but something swirled thick and deep in his eyes that made one feel uncomfortable.

“This factory...is where I used to work.”

Smack.

The wrench he hefted with his left hand landed in his right.

“It wasn’t such a great work environment...if I recall only those times then it would be terribly sad. Oh, no, no, every time I recall it I want to cry. See, my eyes are already filled with tears. Oh no no no no, I’m really going to cry. What should I do? What is going on? What are you doing to me? Tell me what I should do when my memories compel me to cry. What good can they bring me? Horrible...how can this be...it’s awful. My memories, mine! But they can’t do me any good! Is this the way things should be? No, I no longer have any faith in myself! This is such a tragedy!”

Smack, smack.

The young man flipped the wrench back and forth between his hands as if he had invented a new form of juggling.

The pace of flipping wrench quickened as if he couldn’t help himself. The figures who were standing around him all silently retreated a couple of steps.

But one of the figures surrounding him shook his head. “Hey, Boss...you’re going off topic.”

“...Oh, my apologies...right...the tragedy. What I liked doing the most then was to dismantle leftover machine parts and damaged vehicles. Well, you could say that back then I was going through a lot, so taking these things apart steadied me, and sometimes I could work the whole day without stopping. It’s no mean feat to remove the parts in reusable condition. But! The factory’s business plummeted and they embarked on a depressing venture.”

“Which is...?”

“They exploited holes in the Prohibition Act and started manufacturing bootleg liquor. They were clever, very clever with their use of the factory equipment...I guess they never thought they’d be caught? But I couldn’t let them do that. It made me terribly sad. Can you imagine – I could watch Boss Ladd slaughter people, but I couldn’t stand watching the manufacture of bootleg alcohol. Ahhh...I had long wanted to shake free of the air of rampant corruption in this factory, so I reported them.”

Smack, smack, smack, smack.

The pace of the flipping wrench continued to speed up as he raised his eyes to the ceiling in despair. “But...the tragedy was that I was still not satisfied. This air of corruption, or the benevolence or the cruelty of humankind, none of them can be seen or touched...and what I wanted was to destroy something substantial.”

Smack smack smack, smack.

“Ah, ah, such a tragedy...In the end, I sunk lower than a mafia boss and became a leader of street rats, and my work became dislocating joints and cars and safes. These things are a lot worse than what I saw in the bootlegging business! But...can you believe this? I, through these acts of destruction, regardless of the nature of good or evil, from these I obtained unadulterated satisfaction!”

Smack, smack, smack, smack, smack, smack, smack....

“Is there anything sadder than this in all the world...! In reality...the one thing that I wanted to destroy was myself! I am the one who should be destroyed! Every time I think of this, I would be so terribly sad ! Extremely upset! What should I do!”

He rose slowly, lowered the wrench down to the floor, and levered up a spare metal part lying on the ground.

The part looked pretty heavy, but he managed to send it high into the air as if it were a soccer ball.

The part began to plummet towards his head, but he only gave the wrench a flick.

There was a sound like a gong ringing, and then the part was lifted into the air again. Gravity drew it down to earth, but it was sent flying again and again.

Bong, clang, boom.... Bong, clang, boom....

His yell and the rhythmic sounds of metal echoed through the factory.

The other men standing around had already retreated to the corners of the factory or behind the pillars, and watched his strange antics from relative safety.

He had produced a smaller wrench at some point and worked nimbly with both wrenches to take apart the metal part he had started with. It was obvious that the smaller pieces weren't torn off by force – they landed on the ground undamaged, in perfectly reusable condition.

“...Hahhh....hah....hah....”

The yelling had finally ceased. The parts dancing wildly in the air seemed to vanish as if by magic.

He stowed the smaller wrench in a pocket, and with this free hand, snatched the last metal part falling through the air.

He took a deep breath and opened his hand to see that it was a screw, just the size of his thumb. Then he began inspecting the parts lying on the ground to make sure that they had been removed to his satisfaction.

The sadness on his face had vanished to be replaced by a smile with a tinge of insanity about it, as if it belonged to a mad clown.

“...a total success.”

The rest of the gang now approached him cautiously. They were a ragtag bunch of ordinary delinquents and they were all dressed differently from one another, and none of them wore the same blue work clothes.

One of them spoke up. "H...hey, Graham, you feelin' okay now?"

Graham didn't seem to have heard what he said. He just turned a few circles and then stared at the ceiling.

The ceiling was full of holes, and through them the night sky was visible.

As he gazed at the twinkling stars, Graham's eyes filled with tears. But these tears didn't seem to arise out of the same sadness as before.

“I took it all apart...it didn’t land on the floor once! Did you see it? Did you? Ah, I should be praised for my thoroughness! And my precision!”

Graham hurled his wrench upwards. It spun in the light and seemed to form a disk, right before it flew through one of the holes in the ceiling.

“Beautiful! Life...life is beautiful!”

The wrench started its decent. Graham turned a half-circle on his heels as if he were a dancer, reached a hand behind his back and caught the falling wrench.

What he had just accomplished was a superhuman feat, but Graham only smiled as if it was routine. “Hmm! I thought I could pluck a star from the skies just now...too bad. But then again...if a star really did fall, we’d all be dead, right? Great...fantastic...totally awesome! Aren’t we very very fortunate that I didn’t knock down a star? What does it mean? What does it meeeeean? Is this the will of heaven? The will of the universe? That I should live? Right?”

He seemed just as excited as before – the focus of the emotion had changed, that was all.

To any other people, Graham’s behaviour would indicate that perhaps he was on drugs or something, but the gang standing around took it all in stride and only exchanged grimaces.

Graham Specter was born in Chicago, and had worked as an auto mechanic.

He had also worked for the Russo family on odd jobs, but after his factory shut down, he went to New York. In New York, he became the leader of a small street gang. He had also once kidnapped a girl named Chane, and through this incident he got to know Jacuzzi Splot and Jacuzzi’s group.

Their meeting had been a strange work of fate. Thereafter, Graham, who arrived in New York before Jacuzzi, often helped Jacuzzi out and also received help in return. They were quite close, in one manner of speaking.

However, Nice was an exception on certain matters. Graham liked taking things apart and derived great joy from it, but felt that blowing things up and taking things apart stemmed from very different philosophies. So he never saw eye to eye with Nice.

Other than his strange habits, what made Graham slightly intolerable was his mood swings. He could go from the depths of despair to the heights of elation in a second. His emotions ran to extremes; if it wasn’t 100, it was 0.

No one knew whether he was consciously putting on an act or whether he didn’t even realize what he was doing. But it wasn’t that Graham had a bad temper – it was just that his emotions were volatile and ever-changing.

He might seem like someone who was hard to get along with, but although he liked destroying things, he could be extremely considerate of others as well. This was the side of Graham that many admired, and a surprising number of people considered him as a friend.

One of the gang who admired him now started clapping. “Oh boy oh boy, Boss, you’re totally awesome. How’s this, next time you catch the wrench, try doing it with your head eh? If you get it, then we’ll all celebrate by going to your funeral.”

His ovation and praises were obviously sarcastic. He looked at Graham and saw that Graham had realized this discrepancy too.

“Hmm? Are you making fun of me? Dammit, I seem to be feeling pretty cheerful after being insulted. A masochist? Am I a masochist? Impossible! Yet a part of me thinks that it might be great fun. Damn, I really feel really happy!”

“Well, it’s more like we’re masochists for sticking with you...anyway, I’ve got nothing to say about you being a masochist or not, but some big news popped up and I gotta report.”

“Damn, you think if I keep feeling excited, I’ll explode? But I won’t give in...! Bring it on! I will withstand all, and I will retaliate! I will probably kill you! Ah, no, that won’t do...I’m going to kill! Hurry, someone stop me...! My battle’s just begun!”

This response from Graham made all of his companions sigh and shake their heads. As he spoke, he was tapping his feet as if he was about to start dancing, but his gang was used to this and ignored it. "Not much, just that Boss Placido has something going and wants a word with you."

Placido.

Graham stopped fidgeting as soon as he heard this name.

"Yeah? What time?"

"Uh, thirteen minutes ago...like around when you started telling your story."

"What? Wait a second! That's weird! Totally really weird! Why didn't you say so at first, Shaft?"

"Shaft" was probably a nickname of some sort. The young man who was addressed as Shaft still looked pretty cool and collected even though he was being accused. "Well, it didn't look like anyone could get a word in edgewise."

"I see. I understand...never mind. Sadness can be turned around by joy, like it is with me!"

"Boss Graham, there's something else."

Graham had started sauntering out in the direction of the Russo Manor, and he turned to Shaft with a smile. "Hm? What? Good news? Happy news? If it's not happy news then don't say it."

"You've already told the story about reporting the factory like ten times. Even though you talk about it differently and it's real interesting and stuff, anyone would get bored after all that. I think you need to experience more out of life, you know? Keep walking on the road of life."

"Was that happy news?"

"Surely Boss Graham is very ha, very ha-ah-haaaaah...."

"Shaft, if you're happy you've got to laugh. And you know, if you don't mentally prepare yourself to smile all the time, when the time comes you might even start crying. Like now! Ahahahaha!"

The smiling Graham had clamped the wrench around Shaft's neck and started tightening it.

It seemed like he was going to kill Shaft, but everyone around him knew that he never killed anyone. They just sighed or smiled painfully, and no one tried to stop him.

To tell the truth, the only one who was really happy now was probably only Graham himself.

(Russo Manor, Chicago)

There was a striking mansion that stood out from its neighbours in the outskirts of Chicago.

Even at night there would be men coming and going there, men with unkind faces. Although everyone knew their line of work, no one ever uttered a peep about it.

Car dealership – that was the official job title of Placido Russo, the proprietor of this mansion. He also owned a few restaurants and hotels, but those were also just cover stories.

Because Placido Russo was the leader of a criminal organization, one of the most powerful in the Chicago region.

But a few years ago, their organization suffered a string of bad luck, as if they were being cursed. Their power and reputation plummeted. There were still many members in the organization, but rumours said that its days were numbered.

The start of their bad luck was a pair of robbers. A pair of robbers, disguised as baseball stars, had stolen their whole month's worth of income. It all went downhill from there.

They lost the mole they had planted in the Lemures on the same day, and also got assaulted by a group of young delinquents in the city; then, their most powerful member left the organization in what was practically an act of betrayal.

Ladd and his pals meant to rob a train, but not long after their departure, the rest of the organization received word that they had been arrested. Ladd was then locked in Alcatraz.

At that time, Placido told himself, good riddance of a maniac like that, but soon he was no longer able to sustain such an attitude.

He could not possibly have imagined how much impact his nephew had on everyone else. As soon as word got out that the Placido had lost Ladd, all the organizations around them started applying enormous pressure on the Russos. Then the news that his money had been stolen also started leaking out too.

It was the members who had joined because of Ladd. With Ladd gone, they felt that they had nothing to do with Placido, and took their leave and joined other organizations. Rather rude of them, Placido thought.

With everything deteriorating, the last straw was that the dozen or so members who had been sent to do business with the Chinese Mafia also got slaughtered.

The Chinese Mafia took care of the bodies afterwards, and this wasn't anything out of the ordinary in of itself. But they seemed to regard this as an enormous favour, and used it to gain leverage over the Russo family.

Placido suspected that the Chinese Mafia killed everyone, but he didn't have any evidence, and the discrepancy between their power was so great that Placido would probably get his throat slit even before he started moving against them.

In the end, Placido had no way out of his present situation. Rumours began circling around within the organization that he was losing his grip. That he was near the end of his line. He became a common target of wine-sodden discussions and ridicule – the laughingstock of all the organized criminals in the Chicago area.

And this was Placido Russo.

But he still had a card to play.

"So you're here," Placido boomed as Graham walked in. His voice was rich and deep and didn't sound like a man approaching sixty. It was as if all the rumours flying around hadn't affected him. "And you're late."

"I just had a small matter to take care of."

"I hope it wasn't the kind of small matter as your first time coming here. Robbing a train, such stupidity."

Graham held back the urge to laugh and struggled to appear respectful. He gave a bow.

“Oh, that was just because a friend tried to do something similar, and I wanted to try my hand at it too.”

He had indeed tried to rob a train on his way to Chicago. However it didn’t go as planned, because some journalists travelling on the same train stopped him. In the end, he only managed the rather sorry achievement of robbing one pig-headed and whiskered old man.

For a few days, he wandered for a few days to avoid the police, and arrived later than he planned. The ones who had asked him to come and help them waited through those days in constant fear of his arrest.

“Right, I’ll try my best to fill in for Boss Ladd before his release, yeah?”

“Well, first of all, what’s wrong with your pal there? He looks kind of blue.”

“He looks really happy about something, don’t you think?”

Shaft, who had almost been suffocated earlier, looked like he was still lacking blood to his head. His gaze looked a little unsteady, but he still managed to stand up straight as a poker. Graham, though, still slouched with the wrench stowed back at his waist.

Such behaviour from Graham might have cost him his head had it been any other Mafia boss, but Placido didn’t mind the slightest. “So what do you need?”

It seemed that Graham didn’t like Placido much. After a simple greeting, he went right to the point. “It’s been quite a few days since you called me over to Chicago, but there’s been nothing going on, and I’m really really bored. You know, it’s made me tell the same story to my gang ten times, and they’re reaching their breaking point.”

“Don’t be so impatient. Among all of the cards, you’re the King. It’s natural to save the King until the end.”

Graham gave a sardonic smile as if he had been reminded of someone. “Ah, but there are also King cards that open the game by slaughtering all of his opponents. You should be careful.” He shook his head. “So, what have you got for me?”

“Nothing much, just a small deal. I simply want you go to go and invite over some guests.”

“?”

Placido was insinuating something, and it didn’t sound like he got Graham a job as a chauffeur. “It’s possible that the guest might come storming in on their own...however, I want to be courteous host, and also bring him back alive.”

“Oh, so my first job is a big risk, is it? You want us to refrain from killing people who might kill us and bring them back?”

“And before you bring back our guests, you should make them...a little more harmless.”

“.....”

---Whatever. It’s been five years since they’ve handed out a job like this.

“All right, I’m up for it.”

“But Boss!” It looked as though Shaft finally recovered.

Shaft had been a little tongue-tied in front of Placido, but he looked at Graham in undisguised askance and despair, as if saying "Why would you take such a dangerous job?"

"Another thing. There are more than one possible guest, and you need only being back one. Rumours have it that they've got a little kid running with them too."

"....."

Placido turned to a door on the far side of the room. "Men, come out and give him the drill."

The door opened and three men stepped through.

All three men looked like gangsters, and the man in the middle had a distinct scar on his face.

"So you're Graham, are you?"

"...And you?"

Graham could see that the man with the scar was the leader of the three men and zeroed in on him, but then Placido cut in. "This is Klik. He supervises all the young members of the Russo family."

"...Hm."

Klik seemed to disapprove of an outsider being there, and looked Graham up and down with disdain.

Graham picked up on it. "Wow, is that snobbery I sense? It's like your eyes are saying 'How come this prick gets to stand in the presence of the Don too? He's just a failed criminal running a small crew. Do you need help shoving that toy of a wrench up your ass and tighten up the loose screws in your brain? Just another bottom feeder, a slug. Is that it? If it is then boy am I lucky today, I'm going to make myself a good fighting partner."

The atmosphere in the room tensed. Klik frowned in annoyance and glared at Graham. "I wasn't thinking anything about slugs, but you got the rest."

"Haha! I really like tough guys like you. But I warn you, you should be careful, because Boss Ladd really doesn't like your kind. If you go toe to toe with him then you're going to die. And no no, I'm not waving his name about casually or hiding behind his reputation. That was a fair warning – so watch out."

"That's enough! Shut it!" Placido snapped and the room went quiet. The order was full of confidence and severity, and it really did not sound like a man about to go under.

Placido signalled Klik with his eyes, and Klik gave a slight nod, took a piece of paper out of his breast pocket, and handed it to Graham.

As soon as Graham's gaze fell on the paper, his heart started to beat faster. And not because the paper contained information about his friends.

"Well, fascinating...! What is this? Where did they come from? A carnival troupe? Oh no no no...which country did this troupe come from?"

Graham was completely taken up by his curiosity, and he read the descriptions on the Wanted poster again and again, his eyes sparkling.

What he read was about a barrel-like toddler over two meters tall, a young man with scars all over his body, an Asian man with claws for hands, a man who always wore a hat and who ranted incessantly, and a beautiful woman with golden hair who knew Capoeira.

These fantastic descriptions so captivated Graham that his eyes, previously hooded and sleepy, were now open and sparkling like a child's.

Klik had thought Graham passive and laid back, but now Graham looked like he was itching to start. This sudden personality shift made Klik glare hard at Graham. "You better get this, pal – you're working apart from us. We can't trust you, but this is just so that I could say 'I warned you' before you snuff it, so remember that warning."

His voice was cold, as if he were interrogating a prisoner. And this was no an empty threat.

But.

"If they catch you, and if you even utter a peep about the Russo family, I'll put you through a meatgrinder. And you will feel that it would have been better to be born a slug."

"All righty, off I go then."

Graham didn't seem to have heard a thing that Klik had said. He just grasped the Wanted poster tightly in his hands and started walked towards the door with a big smile on his face.

Placido wanted to contain the situation a little. "Hey, our boys are already scoring the city for them, so you just wait your turn."

But Graham shook his head. "It'd be a pity not to join in the hunt for something so cool, don't you think?"

As Placido watched Graham leave, still with a big smile, he muttered to no one in particular, "Hm...the apple doesn't fall far from the tree...He's just the same as Ladd, that idiot."

"Can we trust him, Boss?"

The minute Graham left, Klik let all his bottled-up annoyance show and bared his teeth. His two associates had gone, leaving him and Placido alone in the room.

On the other hand, Placido didn't look the slightest bit concerned. "Who knows. He's the perfect joe for the job as long as we're not asking him to be an assassin. It's just that his loyalty lies with Ladd and not me...So we need to be prepared at all times in case he decides to turn against us. And the ones who brought them over at first were the gang on good terms with Ladd, and they got nothing to do with us."

"...Um...I don't mean no offence to your nephew, Boss, but he's already left the family."

Klik didn't know exactly what went on between Placido and Ladd. He just knew that Placido have been wanting to get rid of Ladd, but still he showed some outward respect to him.

And Placido knew this, but didn't seek to correct Klik. "We'll let them hammer it out first, and get the lowdown on those freaks and what orders they're running with." He gave a deep sigh. "The powers up there really want that intel."

Placido and Klik then moved on to discuss other matters, but at one point Klik suddenly grew serious and began speaking in a very low voice.

“Hey, Boss...you don’t planning on having that ragtag gang have a drink too, do you?”

“They’re just cannon fodder. I don’t care how many of them dies.” But then he also lowered his voice, and said something very strange.

“How does it feel to die and come back to life?”

Klik looked faintly stunned as he touched his throat, as if to ascertain whether the fatal wound caused by having his throat slashed by a pair of claws really had healed.

“It doesn’t feel that great. It only took a second so we still had to play dead. Anyway, I count us lucky that we came back to life after they left.” Saying this reminded Klik of what had happened earlier that day, and he felt a shiver run down his spine. “The freak had his claws at our throat in the blink of an eye...It was lucky too, that they just attacked us with no questions asked. If they wanted to put the screws on us, we’d be in some deep shit.”

“Well, you should know that severe wounds take time to heal.”

“There wasn’t time to remember that...all I know is that I never want to face those creatures again – how many times would I have to put my life on the line...”

Placido took a pair of scissors from the table. “You don’t need to think that way anymore...well, I suppose you’re right. No one wants to be in pain.” And he stabbed the scissors into his left hand.

Blood spurted out immediately, but Placido was smiling. “Pain just vanishes so fast. You can get hooked on this feeling after you get used to it.”

In an instant, the bleeding stopped, and then the wound began to heal as if everything were a film run backwards. It was as if Placido’s blood had a mind of its own, swarming back into his wound like worms.

Klik took in all of this, gave a gratified smile, bowed and left the room.

“I’ll have that maniac know...”

Alone in the room, Placido looked down at his perfectly healed left hand and contemplated Ladd’s behaviour.

What weighed him down even now was how Ladd had held him at gunpoint, Ladd’s wild rant, and his own fear pressing down upon him.

(I want to kill the ones – I mean I feel happiest after killing them – the douchebags who think they’re invincible! Get it? The ones who think they’re in their absolute safest places, and have nooooo idea that they could die any second. Just like---)

(You got it---)

(Just like you, dear uncle!)

He couldn't believe that Ladd, his nephew who was less than half his age, could bring such fear and humiliation upon him. This memory was still etched in his mind.

"Ladd, you're absolutely right... I never believed that I could die any second." Fury and elation battled in Placido's face as the gutful of anger towards his nephew burst out. "But you can't kill me now! Never! Never!"

This outburst echoed around the room and back into Placido's own ears. The truth behind it was his spiritual sustenance.

"Haha....Ahahahahaha.....Ahahahahahahahaha!"

And his wild, forced laughter was the balm for his heart, as if it added extra flavour to his new and awesome power.

"Hey, Ladd's gonna be released soon, right? Is the family picking him up?"

"Yeah Klik, what's the deal then? Is the boss still taking Ladd back?"

The two other men bombarded Klik with questions as soon as he stepped out of Placido's office.

Klik's lip curled. "Whatever. As you saw today, boys, we ain't ordinary goons no more."

"Yeah, that's right."

Klik's smile grew wider, and in his smile was a measure of confidence and ease that wasn't there before he died and came back to life earlier in the day. "We all know how powerful these bodies have become. I feel invincible. But that's natural, eh? We never have to fear death ever again."

He settled into his newfound sense of power and turned back to the subject of Ladd, his voice full of swagger and condescension. "Ladd counts for nill. It's up the boss whether he's to kick the bucket or whether he gets to keep his life and become our tool. Capiche?"

"It's all up to the boss... 'cause we've got the perfect hostage."

In the depths of the Russo mansion, a child called into a door.

"I brought some soup."

"All right, thank you very much." The light, graceful voice of a woman answered the child.

The woman sat in an extraordinary room. It was opulently furnished, with a bookcase, bed, and desk and chair. However, there was something off about the room, as if the air was slightly heavy and pushing down upon the woman within.

It was the windows. It was only open a crack, and one could see countless bars crossing it. And it was obvious that the bars weren't installed to decorate the room or prevent people from falling out. They were the bars of a prison.

The space between the bars were no thicker than a man's wrist, and made the air of the room seem even heavier. They were a constant reminder to the resident of where she stood. To remind her of the hard reality of her incarceration.

But it seemed that the imprisoned woman didn't mind.

Her outlook remained the same whether she was imprisoned or whether she was free. If she changed, it was already a long time ago.

She would not die.

She had come to this decision when she had caused harm to someone important to her, when they were separated.

For the promise she made.

For the promise she made to the man she loved.

For the promise that he would kill her without mercy.

The woman sipped her soup and stared into space. She thought of the man who loved her, who would kill her because he loved her – Ladd Russo – and fell into reverie. Ought she celebrate the fact that she was still alive, or mourn?

Her name was Lua Klein.

She was Ladd Russo's fiancée. Her thoughts fixed incessantly on the man in a distant prison, and fixed incessantly on the day she would die, and what it would be like.

She hoped and dreamed for this day to come.

Prologue VII: Supernatural Requital

(The winter of 1933, somewhere in Chicago)

When he opened his eyes, he saw that he was lying in bed.

Around him floated strange, seemingly artificial scents, and he immediately felt at ease.

He thought that he might be dreaming, but after a few minutes, as he woke gradually, he realized that he was in a hospital or some similar establishment.

When he tried to move, pain shot through his back. At the same time, he heard the voice of a child.

“Oh, wonderful. You’ve finally come to.”

He turned his head quietly to see that a child was standing beside his bed, perhaps elementary school age or slightly older.

The child looked relieved to see that he had awoken, but there was something still troubled in his gaze.

His presence reminded the man on the bed of what had happened, how he had come to be here, and who this child was.

Fighting against the pain in his back, he began to slowly and quietly recall...

A shadow crawled painstakingly forwards, and left a thin stream of blood in his wake. He struggled to escape the clutch of death.

The shadow was a strange being, with eyes crimson like blood. The whites of his eyes were completely red. In the centres of his eyes, black pupils floated on white irises.

Between his lips, which were parted in a weak smile, there were two rows of sharp teeth. Even teeth that weren’t meant to be sharp, such as incisors and molars, were pointed like those of a tiger. His smile and his teeth made one think of the rows of teeth inside a seal’s mouth.

Stranger still was his clothing, which looked to be aristocratic dress from a century or more ago. His smile, his teeth, his eyes and his clothing made him appear as if a vampire had stepped out of legend.

Christopher Shouldered.

That was his name.

He was a member of Lamia, Huey Laforet’s private team. A number of days ago, had just been going about his own business, when he had tasted his first defeat in forty years.

Huey had used the craft that Szilard produced and created his own homunculi. Christopher was different from Ennis, who was immortal, and also different from the other “incomplete” immortals, who could grow old. Christopher did not grow old.

Christopher and the other homunculi were different but they lived among ordinary humans. However, compared to ordinary humans, they lead a positively supernatural existence.

As Huey's research grew into perfection, his creations left death farther and farther behind. Their status as members in Huey's team meant that they could fully exploit their abilities. As long as they avoided harm and protected themselves from accidents, there wasn't much difference between them and complete immortals.

His existence had exceeded the limits of nature. Perhaps that was why this defeat had been so crushing. It was as if he had been defeated in a showdown with nature itself.

That spring, during the Mist Wall incident, he had been utterly defeated, and this truth irreparably broke his heart.

His opponent's name had been Felix Walken. It was probably a false name, but this didn't matter to Christopher.

His opponent was even further away from humanity than even Christopher was.

Christopher had seen the strength and ability of his opponent with his own eyes, and it had shaken him terribly. He went to the lakeside to think things over and lose himself in his beloved nature, hoping that it would dispel some of his weariness.

When he realized that he was being attacked from behind, it was already too late.

It was someone who hated him, who knifed him in the back.

The best thing to do would be to retaliate and leave the area immediately, but Christopher was not a true immortal, so the blood from his body couldn't flow back in.

As he lay by the lake, wrapped in unexpected defeat and feeling the heat leaving his body, Christopher finally came to understand how he was different from the other homunculi and from the rest of humanity.

The crimson light in his eyes slowly faded.

“What's the difference...? I live from day to day, just like the rest...I don't want to die either...Who can tell me...the difference? How am I different!”

As he pondered what he lacked to still the fear of death in his chest, he saw a shadow beside him.

Christopher looked the shadow over from head to foot, and gave a warm smile. “Hey...want to be friends?”

The small figure paused for a moment at this strange question from the wounded man. When the figure spoke, his voice was small and quiet.

“Friends? With me?”

The child was puzzled, but held no suspicions about the wounded man. He reached a hand towards Christopher.

“My name is Ricardo, Ricardo Russo. Pleased to meet you.”

Lying in bed, Christopher shut his eyes and managed to recall everything.

What should he say to the worried young man beside him?

Although it only took a moment for him to consider, all kinds of thoughts and suspicions crept unbidden into his mind, just like the unrelenting pain in his back. But perhaps due to a combination of weariness and the side effects of whatever drugs given to him, he felt sleep overtake him again.

But Christopher opened his eyes, and his first words were a simple reply.

“My name is Christopher...Christopher Shouldered. Nice to meet you too.”

Upon hearing this reply, the young man nodded, breathed a sigh of relief, and smiled.

Christopher responded with a terrifying, fang-filled smile of his own, and fell into sleep.

A few days passed.

Christopher, fully conscious now and with the pain in his back lessening, began to consider his current situation.

---I've been saved.

It was inconceivable that someone could reach a hand of aid to him, considering in the state that he was in. And it was also inconceivable that his last words had been asking to be friends. Wouldn't people normally be screaming "Help me" in that situation?

Whatever the case, he had been rescued, and here he was.

From the words of the doctors, this hospital had a close relationship with the Russo family, and the young man who had rescued him was the grandson of Placido Russo.

As he was rushed to the hospital, on the edge of death, he heard Ricardo proclaim himself as a member of the family to another member. Christopher had only one question to ask the doctor.

“So...so then all around me...around me...”

The doctor seemed to have guessed what Christopher would say in advance. “If you are asking about the drug addict's corpse, it's already been disposed of,” he cut in. “And you don't need to feel that the Russo family has done you a favour. Drug addicts are often seen around these parts, so our young master as told you to forget about it.”

--- Ah, that annoying guy must have been an undercover agent in the Russo family. Christopher scrabbled around in his befuddled mind for memories of the man.

He had one last question for the doctor.

“That Ricardo boy...why did he save me?”

“Who knows. Normally he never uses the family's resources like this, so this time it's just to save you...I think he said something like, 'He's my friend, so I have to.'”

The doctor seemed uninterested, and just shrugged and left.

--- Why me?

There was no use obsessing about it, and answers didn't come. Christopher lay back and concentrated on getting better.

It's not like he could stay around this place for long, he thought.

---Yeah, I guess the Twins would find me here soon enough. All I have to do is repay the child for his kindness, and then it'll be over and done with.

--- But weird, having him think of me as a friend – that feels kind of nice.

Ricardo arrived as soon as the doctor left.

“Hey, you look much better, Chris.”

His face didn't show the same peaceful expression as before, but rather a kind of cool displeasure.

--- Yep, better than Sickle, at least, Christopher thought, as he examined Ricardo. He came to the conclusion that there wasn't anything troubling the boy – it was probably just his everyday expression.

Ricardo had just called him “Chris” like an old friend, but Christopher treated those around him casually sometimes too, and he didn't feel that this was very strange at all.

“Right. Well, thanks.”

“For what?” Ricardo's expression didn't change. Others might feel puzzled, but Christopher understood. He gave a grin.

“Two things. First, for saving me, and second, for wanting to be friends.”

Ricardo didn't seem to think of what to say to this, and remained silent. It looked like he just wasn't an outwardly nice and cheerful kind of person.

Christopher wanted to observe Ricardo for a while longer, but Ricardo didn't have anything to say, and both of them sat in an atmosphere of peculiar gravity.

In the end, Christopher relented. “I have a question.”

“What is it?”

“Why did you save me? Save someone under suspicious circumstance, someone not...not human, but pretty monstrous. And you wanted to be friends right after meeting. I should warn you, in the future, if someone suddenly decides they want to be friends with you, you shouldn't trust them. They might do you in.”

Christopher thought it was kind of fun to say things that went against his own benefit.

The young man listened quietly until Christopher had finished, and spoke a very simple answer. “That's the reason right there.”

“?”

“I wanted to save you for that exact reason. Because I felt that you...you could help me destroy this world I dislike so much, including myself.”

His voice was level as he said this, chillingly level.

If he had said this in tears, perhaps the story behind what he said could have been wormed out of him. Or even if he had said this with a hanging head, his listener might have suspected other motivations, and recall the kind of society he lived among. But Ricardo said this without the least emotion, as if he was reading from a script.

But it was precisely because of this that Christopher believed him.

“I just wanted to use you...so I agreed to be friends. I suppose it’s rather low, right?”

“Nah, such simplicity doesn’t bother me. Symbiotic relationships and parasitic relationships are both quite natural. No one said that a sea cucumber and the little fish living inside it can’t have feelings for each other, right?” Christopher grinned again, showing off his teeth. He shook his head as if he wasn’t even convinced by his own words. “But then again, becoming friends with a circus clown won’t get you a ticket to Neverland. Well, actually, you never know...I seem to remember someone saying that clowns have their own power...The Poet said something like ‘The nose of the clown conceals an empty Pandora’s box.’ What do you think that means?”

Ricardo refused to get sidetracked by Christopher’s talk, and continued coolly, “It’s not like I saved you because you look funny.”

He looked around to see if anyone was listening, and then said in the same voice as before, “You...killed many members of the Russo family at one point, right? I saw it.”

“...”

With one question answered came a new question. “You saw...?”

“I was standing at a distance, and I saw you and a strange Oriental man. I was scared, so I hid.”

“Okay, so did you tell your grandfather this?”

“No, of course not. If I did, you wouldn’t have been able to survive this long.” Ricardo said this in a rather matter-of-fact way, and didn’t sound like he wanted Christopher to repay him or anything.

But his next words did sound a little like he wanted a transaction. “And as for what I’m thinking...I will tell you until we get to know each other better.”

Seeing Ricardo still so composed, Christopher slowly extended his right hand – and suddenly grabbed him by the neck.

His red eyes glowing and his sharp teeth bared in a half-smile, Christopher said quietly, “I’m well enough to move around now, so haven’t you thought that I might, oh, I don’t know, erase the evidence and kill you, and then run away?”

Although Ricardo’s looked like he was in pain, his gaze was still cool and steady. His reply squeezed out from his tightly clenched throat. “...If that’s that way it’s going to be...that would be fine...it’s not so bad, being killed by a friend.”

Christopher immediately released him, and whistled in awe.

“...interesting. Real interesting. Compared to the Poet and Sickle, you have a different kind of weird. Maybe you’d get along with Rail and Frank better, so if we get the chance, I’ll introduce you.”

“Thanks. Though I don’t really know who they are...”

“C’mon, the more friends, the better. And next time I’ll introduce you to my pals in New York. One of them’s called Firo, and though he looks unapproachable sometimes, he’s really a pretty warm guy. Compared to Chi and Leeza, I guess. He and I are on really good terms.”

“Have you thought about why you should introduce your friends to someone who said they use their friends?”

Ricardo’s expression had softened a bit, and Christopher continued delightedly. “What are friends for anyway? Sometimes there’s a price, but sometimes they can be used for no cost – that’s what friends are. . Think about it – you’d feel better just from talking with friends. That proves that friendship is really quite a powerful thing.”

“...Well, another thing. You’re still recovering, so how come you’re acting so energetic?”

“Actually, I’m in a lot of pain.”

Ricardo smiled a little, and then they chatted about other things. Christopher began to think that it would be tag along with this young man for a while. It wasn’t that Christopher was currently powerless and Ricardo had the power; Christopher really thought that it would be quite interesting.

---Well, until old man Huey gets through to me with the Twins, I’ll stick around.

Christopher didn’t think much about it, and after he left the hospital, joined the Russo family as Ricardo’s bodyguard. The other members weren’t used to having Christopher around at first, but after seeing the easy way in which Ricardo interacted with him, they accepted Christopher as the norm.

But they didn’t exactly accept Christopher as friend, either. They just treated him like air.

There weren’t many situations that required Christopher to display his skills as a bodyguard, so he just let the quiet days pass in his quiet life.

A year went by in this manner.

There was no word from Huey.

Ricardo didn’t tell Christopher anything new either, and the two of them continued their peculiar and mismatched, but peaceful, friendship.

Time had been passing steadily, peacefully by. Another day was soon to come to its end.

But there was a scent in the air, a premonition of change.

Chapter 2: Unexpected Hysteria

(A certain day in December, 1934. Nebula Building, Chicago)

Downtown Chicago was filled with skyscrapers.

The skyscrapers did not look as if they had cropped up haphazardly, but stood in a neat pattern according to civic planning. Passers-by would sigh with appreciation. Although the buildings had hard lines and cold edges, the beholder would inevitably feel that every floor of these buildings was the crystallization of the builders' labour and aspirations.

If one stood right in the middle of the street and looked up, there between the tops of the skyscrapers was a patch of wintery sky. The heavens and the steel and concrete combined to form a kind of offbeat harmony.

And a certain company also had their headquarters amid this spectacular scene, poised upon the newly-developed area at the edge of the lake.

It wasn't far from the Wrigley Building, which was recognizable by its renowned clock tower. However, this building was different – it reached towards the sky with walls of unbroken white. This was the Nebula Headquarters.

It was similar to its branch in New York, the Mist Wall building, but this Chicago building was an even purer white. Under the sunlight, it almost gave off an illusion of being a lighthouse rising out of the mist.

Ten years ago, when Karl Muybridge first established the Nebula Company here, Nebula had only been a chapter of an entertainment company. Their job was to make equipment for amusement parks and draw up plans for large-scaled public events. But Muybridge was sharp and handled money well, so he expanded his company into a wide variety of business and reaped massive rewards by investing in stocks. Nebula became a national corporation in a surprisingly short time.

Nebula had penetrated into many different markets. In addition to creating amusement park equipment and event planning, they also owned businesses in food production, chemical industry, the steel industry, insurance, and recently also took on publishing. There had been rumours that it would be taking up weapons research and manufacture as a side interest.

The Nebula motto was, if you have what it takes, you can be chairman in ten years. But the Great Depression had made all aspects of the economy plummet, including Nebula's business. However, it still stood as a symbol of rapid success in the city centre. It was the American dream come true.

At the foot of the symbolic building stood a girl, who was clutching a camera and yelling.

"It's wonderful....Mr. Vice President, it's wonderful! Every window has a different design! And look at the bronze statue in front! It's gorgeous!"

Before she arrived, she had poured through stacks of information about the Nebula Corporation. But seeing this feat of architectural artistry firsthand instantly blew everything else out of her mind.

"It is said that this building was only constructed after Nebula consulted many architects and synthesized their designs together to address one another's shortcomings. There was a whole spectrum of public opinion about dividing the design work among various architects – some individuals believed it innovative and others lambasted it."

The voice that answered the girl with the camera was a man with sharp eyes and a monocle, who was sauntering towards the entrance.

“Wait, hang on for a second. Let me get a photo at a good angle...”

“Our headquarters have already taken a photo, three months ago. The building hasn’t changed significantly since then, so there is no need to take another one. And if you take whatever photos you please, you may be liable to be persecuted, so take care.”

An image flashed in Carol’s mind of grim lawyers surrounding her with legal documents and gavels, and this made her voice a little shrill. “P-persecuted?”

The vice-president just kept walking, and didn’t pay any attention to this except to continue his lecture.

“That is not the only reason. We have no idea what may occur in the future, therefore we must not waste film. You needn’t worry – you can improve as long as you grasp the principles of photography and hone your skills as you progress in the field.”

“Um...sorry...”

“Ah, well, then again, that was merely my own humble opinion, and there are numerous people who think otherwise. As a reporter, it is very important to listen to a wide range of ideas before deciding on one’s own. You may write a very distorted piece under stress, pressure from your publisher, and public opinion...however, on the whole, it is wise to listen to a wide range of opinions.”

He was again expounding on a grand theory, but Carol still listened attentively and nodded in agreement and hefted her camera and trotted after him.

These two individuals were employees from the small organization, the Daily Days.

Although it seemed like an insignificant New York newspaper publisher, it was merely the front for a well-established trading post for information, renowned throughout the nation.

Carol, who was working as an intern there, seemed like she should still be in school, and no one knew her age. As for the vice president, Gustav St. Germain, it was even more difficult to judge his age. Judging by appearances alone, most passers-by would think them father and daughter.

Vice-president St. Germain had a very different role from the desk-bound and paperwork-loving president of the DD. He placed enormous value on firsthand experience, and thus travelled all over the country and even abroad. If he showed up at the office even ten days out of a year, it would be considered frequent for him.

He was a busy man, and this time he meant to visit the DD staff in other cities and get photographs of them. Carol was brought along on this long and exhausting trip so that it might further her training.

“When we shall need to use film is something we shall never know.”

This principle was firmly locked in Carol’s mind.

They had arrived ten days before, and on the way they had encountered a train robbery. Vice-president St. Germain’s quick thinking had gotten them through, but Carol was still ashamed that she had panicked and not taken any photos of the incident as a consequence.

--- I’d never become a independent reporter this way...I won’t panic again...I won’t...eeeeeeeeek!

“Eeeeeeeeeek! Mr. Vice-President! Mr. Vice-president!”

“Carol, calm yourself.”

But she was beyond soothing. “B-but...the man who just passed us...”

“Yes, that was Senator Manfred Beriam.”

Carol twisted her neck several times to gawk, but other people blocked her view and she couldn’t get a good look.

“How can you be so calm about it?”

His face remained impassive. “It’s not like he’s the president. If you let seeing a senator faze you so, what will become of you?”

Carol was once again filled with admiration at her boss’s cool demeanor.

--- Amazing. Nothing can ruffle him.

After she calmed down a bit, she realized something about his position as a reporter, and ventured a question. “But then again, Mr. Vice-President, you must be very well-connected to know someone in such a huge company.”

“The expanse of the company doesn’t matter. Everyone is a valuable contact in the eyes of the DD, and must be treated with the utmost respect. However, we meet with them as equals, and shall never grovel or yield.”

“Right!”

Carol happily stepped into the elevator, trying to imagine what the vice-president’s contact person might be like.

The elevator began to ascend and leave the ground behind, past the lounges and boardrooms, towards the topmost floor.

(Thirty minutes later, first floor great hall)

“Really, Carol... If we were to compare the magnitude of their fame, he would be less famous than Senator Beriam. Your conduct could only earn you 325 points.”

“...out of how many...?”

The vice-president just shook his head and sighed, and lead the somewhat stupefied Carol to sit on the benches in the entrance hall.

Carol was still reeling from their experience, and could only plop weakly down on benches. Her mouth opened and closed as if she were a goldfish.

“Collect yourself...why be so nervous in front of such an amiable gentleman?”

“B-b-because...I..I just saw th-the president...”

“He is not the president. Mr. Muybridge is the chairman. And another matter, Carol. Haven’t I told you that you are not to call me Vice-president in front of outsiders, but to call me St. Germain? And yet you still

repeatedly addressed me as Vice-president. What if the man we saw today was also the vice-president of his own company? What would you do then?"

He wasn't particularly angry and said this in the same calm air as before, but Carol didn't seem to have absorbed any of it.

High above her head, at the topmost floor, was a rooftop garden with a lawn and lounge chairs. There she had met the chairman of Nebula, who was renowned nationally as a self-made man, if not all over the world.

She recalled everything up to the point where Gustav St. Germain had greeted their contact, but then she couldn't remember much after the contact introduced himself. She couldn't even remember what he looked like. It was all a blur.

Carol glanced at the composed vice-president beside her and shook her head, her face still pale.

--- Just what is he made out of...?

Carol was still wrestling with her fraught nerves and admiration when St. Germain said, "I am going to buy a drink," and abruptly left.

--- The Vice-president gone makes me feel a bit anxious...

She had a moment of fear as she realized that she was holding her camera. What if she was mugged? But her legs were like jelly and she couldn't get up to chase after St. Germain, so could only sit there, a lonely little figure in the vast entrance hall.

Rationally, she knew that there won't be thieves in a place like this, but she didn't have enough courage and practice to put up a brave front in an utterly unfamiliar place.

--- Oh...

She had been pale before, but more blood drained from her face.

A figure had appeared in front of her.

The first thing about the figure that she processed was a white lab coat, so her first thought was that it was a doctor.

--- A doctor?

Then she saw the curves on this person, and made another assumption, though it was still off the mark.

--- A woman doctor?

The first American woman to become a doctor was Elizabeth Blackwell, in the 1800s. In 1853, the first all-female hospital appeared in New York after much hard work from Blackwell and other fellow champions. Such were the historical precedents and there were more women becoming doctors now, but Carol hadn't seen many doctors at all, so for her it was still a curious sight.

Perhaps the Vice-president was worried about her health and went to fetch a doctor?

Carol immediately became very embarrassed at this idea and started to protest. "Huh? Um...I'm all right! Sorry! I'm Sorry!" Her mind was still jumbled and she could only apologize over and over again, without the faintest idea what she was apologizing for.

To her surprise, the woman jumped in fright and also began to apologize along with her, and seemed to be repeating everything she said.

“What? Uh, um, excuse me! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

Carol had recovered a little by now and could focus her eyes enough to look this woman over.

Above the white lab coat was a pair of black-rimmed glasses, and the face that wore the glasses seemed a bit silly and vacant. Two long strands of her bangs swung across her forehead. In contrast with all of this was the figure under the lab coat, which was like a model’s and could one day be compared to a Barbie’s – a perfect figure, with curves that seemed to be almost too pronounced.

Her attire was professional enough, but every time she bowed her head or leaned over, the action would emphasize her rather buxom chest. A slightly random thought flashed across Carol’s mind that this looked rather inconvenient, and she would prefer it if her chest didn’t get so big.

“Um, how do I put this...I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to, like, wake you up! It just looked like you were like feeling ill or something, so I was worried and came over to see, but then you jumped up and started apologizing to me! I was thinking, did I accidentally kick you or something like that? Um...I...”

The woman’s eyes were darting left and right confusedly behind her glasses as she uttered this string of apologies, but this only endeared her to Carol a little more. Carol waved both of her hands to show that she was all right. “No, it’s not that at all! I was, um, just a little dizzy, so don’t worry about me! I should apologize to you!”

“Oh, is that so? Sorry, I didn’t mean to butt into your business...”

“No no, I’m the one who should apologize to you.”

“No, I should...”

This back and forth went on for twenty times or so, and Carol found that in the process she was getting less and less nervous. She smiled. “Haha, we seemed to have spent all that time apologizing to each other. Thank you, I feel much better now! Thank you!”

“Huh? Really?” The woman didn’t seem to know what to say to just a direct expression of gratitude, and was flustered for a moment. “Yeah, I guess you look like you’ve recovered. That’s great!”

The woman smiled and also seemed to perk up immensely, and so all the nervousness in Carol vanished.

“My name is Carol, and I’m an assistant for a newspaper. We’re here to interview employees and learn more about this company – I suppose you’re a doctor working here?”

“Hmm? Well...Um...I, like, make medicine and drugs and stuff, so I don’t think I count as a doctor.”

--- So, a pharmacologist?

It made sense that Nebula also had a share in the pharmacy market.

Carol was curious and wanted to ask the woman more about her job, but then --

“What are you doing?”

Into the two girls’ conversation cut a deep voice. Carol and the woman in the lab coat turned as one to face the source of the voice.

Vice-president St. Germain was holding a can of soft drinks and glaring at the woman with his sharp gaze.

“Miss Renée, may I ask what you are doing? This young woman is my assistant.”

“Oh, Mr. Gustav! Um, I was totally not thinking about kidnapping her for an experiment or anything like that!”

Carol took the woman’s words as a joke and instead turned to the vice-president. “Mr. Vice-president!Wait, huh? You know her?”

“Well...not personally, but rather our president is in touch with her...”

“Wow, really? You’re a friend of the president’s? That’s so cool!”

The only thing that Carol knew about the president of the DD was that he was always hidden behind a desk piled high with documents and paperwork, and didn’t even know what he looked like. She didn’t even know whether he left the office at all. To think that he would personally know such a beautiful woman!

Carol was by nature excitable and social, and wanted to interview this woman immediately, but St. Germain stepped in instead. “You normally don’t come down to the entrance, do you?” His voice was calm and flat as usual.

“Yep, that’s right, but I heard DD folks were gracing us with a visit, so I thought, I can at least come down and say hello. I never knew that I would find such a cute assistant too!”

“C-cute? No, I’m not...”

Carol’s face reddened in shyness under her warm smile and bowed her head. It didn’t occur to her that the woman perhaps only thought her cute because she was young, and didn’t try to conceal her joy.

In response to this, the Vice-president just placed his hand lightly on the beaming Carol’s head and continued. “Well, that can wait. I am glad to have met Mr. Muybridge and to find him as well as before. And you? What have you been doing?”

“Ahahaha, same as before too – doing research, failing, bothering everyone else.”

“And the one thousand and two hundred people from New York? Was that a success or a failure?”

“Um, well, I dunno yet...because I’m not, like, the only one conducting that project, you know! First, the experiments need more observation, and second, tons of people are causing trouble for us. Mr. Homer and his men have done a lot in New York, and I’m getting busy here too, with the Russos –”

The vice-president cut in abruptly. “You sound like you are venturing into top secret information that you should not divulge to outsiders.”

Renée started and clapped her hands over her mouth.

--- this is the first time I’ve actually seen someone clap their hands over their mouth.

Carol couldn’t really follow what they were saying, and was just captivated by this woman before her and felt that she liked her more and more. Renée herself looked a little sheepish and grinned at Carol. “Wow, Carol, that was close! If I had kept on talking, I would have to finish you off to keep you quiet!”

Carol laughed at this joke. “Ahaha, yes, that was close!”

The three of them continued to chat for a while before leaving.

“Hey, Renée, I hope your work goes well!”

“Yeah, Miss Carol, you too – Oh no!”

Renée had been waving at Carol while walking backwards, and tripped over a bench and fell sprawling to the floor. She picked herself up and waved again, her face red, and trotted away.

As she left the building, Carol thought that it was odd that a woman like Renée, decked out in glasses and a lab coat, could look so intelligent but actually be so klutzy. But then the vice-president asked her a strange question.

“What did she do to you?”

“Huh? What is it, Mr. Vice-president?”

“Well, I would like to warn you to be careful around her. Before you grasp the best way to interact with her, I suggest that you do not find yourself alone with that woman.”

Carol was confused. “What? Why?”

The vice-president did not answer her, but kept on walking. It was only when they had left the building behind them and got close to the river did he open his mouth, but even then he did not look at Carol but rather stared straight ahead.

“When she said she would finish you off...she meant it.”

(Some minutes before, in front of the Wrigley Building)

The Wrigley chewing gum company was second to none in America, and the Wrigley Building was their pride. It had an especially designed clock tower. If you cut between the Wrigley Building and the Tribune Tower, the road would lead you to the bridge that crossed the Chicago River.

This bridge, which spanned 50 metres across the river, was always filled with activity and people rushing to and fro. But today the people and cars stopped to look wonderingly at the two figures standing at the foot of the bridge. However, once they had taken a good look, the passers-by invariably quickened their pace to avoid any further contact.

What drew their attention was that these two figures seemed to be children - but looked like man-made dolls.

One of the two was huge and built like a beer barrel. He had a knapsack slung around his middle, but owing to his size, it looked like a wallet in proportion.

Beside him, in contrast, was a short and slim boy. Although it was winter, he had no coat on and wore only a simple tank top. The exposed parts of his body were patterned with scars. It almost seemed like he was showing them off.

This boy had an animated expression. He spat out the gum he had been chewing a moment before onto the wrapper and turned to the other boy, who looked fretful.

“Isn’t this great, Frank? I never get sick of gum.”

“Yeah, I like gum too. But I need to chew 10 sticks every time. Or I don’t taste anything. So for me it’s kind of a waste of money.”

“There isn’t any point saving money on small stuff like this. It’s got to be the best food ever. Hey, I heard that this building here, it’s the gum company. If Huey orders us to flatten this city, I’d totally go for that building first.”

“Hoom...right...is that why we’re here?” The big one looked disturbed by his companion’s frank admission of such startling plans. “And hey, Rail...I think people are staring at us...”

“Of course. Between my scars and your figure, which one do you think attracts the most attention? I’d say my scars win. Lots of people have scars, but maybe when they see mine – obviously inflicted on purpose – they’d feel sorry for me.”

“I – I don’t think that’s what they’re thinking...did we really have to come to such a busy place?”

“Don’t worry. Old Huey’s orders about laying low went kaput ages ago. I’m sure the guys after us have gotten wind of us already. And being out in public like this means that were less likely to be hauled off by the police for questioning. If we sneak around it’ll look like we got something to hide and that’ll be worse.”

Then Rail chuckled and perked up as if he had thought of something funny.

“Hey hey, Frank, guess what?”

“What?”

“You know how I said yesterday about posterity not remembering us and stuff? Frank, do you know a guy called Count St. Germain?”

“Hoom...no.”

“He’s someone remembered by posterity, from all the way back in the ancient times in Europe. And actually he got famous from supposedly weird stuff, like being able to move to through time and space at will or immortality and such.”

“R-really?”

“So that’s just it, Frank. We’d be remembered by posterity too if we become famous like that. Like if every time these two figures appear in a city, right, all these explosions would happen and wipe the city off the map.”

Rail’s eyes were sparkling with genuine pleasure, but Frank just stared at him for a long while in doubt.

“N-no, Rail. We can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

Rail looked indignant but Frank only shook his massive head. “If we do that, then there’d be nobody left to tell everyone else about us.”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s true. Haha! Ahahahaha!”

At the boy’s maniacal laughter, passers-by took a few nervous steps away.

At this moment, however, events took a different turn.

Frank and Rail, who were getting bored, suddenly heard a peal of girlish laughter.

At first, they thought that someone was laughing at them. Rail was already used to the looks of curiosity cast in their direction, but outright laughter was new. He wasn't angry about it, but just looked in the direction that the laughter came from.

What he saw was a girl, carrying a camera and walking towards them, laughing.

---What the heck? So she wants a photo now?

This was also new. Rail didn't really mind, since he thought that his scars made him unique and even fashionable. But he suddenly realized that Frank might not like his giant figure.

And anyway, he was the one who wanted to come to the bridge, so it's not like he could complain.

When he thought of this, he managed to catch what the girl was saying to the man beside her.

“Ahahaha! You’re kidding, Mr. Vice-president! I’ve never heard you make a joke before!”

“I was not kidding. Never mind. If you choose not to believe me, I do not have the right to impose my will upon you. On the other hand, I am your superior, and I cannot watch you walk blindly into danger. A dilemma...”

Rail relaxed upon hearing their conversation. So they weren’t laughing at them at all.

He also thought that they had not in fact seen him and Frank and were just walking towards them by chance. The girl seemed to be simply following her companion.

---Huh?

Rail looked at the man beside the girl and suddenly detected a contradiction.

Since they were walking directly towards him and Frank, it stood to reason that the man had seen them. However, the man ignored them completely.

He looked a bit strange too, and the force of his gaze made Rail suspicious. He seemed so cool and collected all the time, so was he an assassin or something?

At this point the vice-president had already walked past them, but the girl was preoccupied and didn't see Frank, and blundered into them head-first.

“Really, Mr. Vice-president! You can’t really be saying that such a nice woman could be danger-AHHHH!”

The girl gave a squeal and stopped.

Frank didn't realize that someone had bumped into him, and thought instead that he had bumped into someone else. He wilted and tried to make himself as small as possible. “Oh, I – I’m sorry.”

The girl rubbed her nose. “Ouch ouch...no, it’s my fault...oh my!”

She had been about to apologize, but when she raised her head and saw Frank, his giant figure scared her into silence.

Rail stepped out from behind Frank's giant leg. "Hey Frank, you scared her you know."

"Eeek!" The girl saw his Frankenstein-like scars and screamed again.

Rail thought that her reaction was pretty funny and also laughed. Frank, though was a little nervous, and looked from Rail to Carol in confusion.

The man, who had been watching them from a couple of feet away, now walked towards them. He put his hand on the girl's head and made her stop screaming.

"Carol, how can you bump into someone and scream in response? How impolite."

"....."

Her breathing was a little ragged, but it seemed that the man's presence gave her a sense of safety. It took her about ten minutes for her breathing to return to normal. As she calmed down, she realized her mistake.

"Oh, yes...s-sorry..."

The man also moved to apologize for Carol and removed his hat. "I must apologize for the fact that my companion has momentarily taken leave of her manners. I assure you that I will chastise her soundly for this once we return."

"Nah, it's okay. You know, when I saw you just now, I thought you looked like an assassin. So we're even."

"But you were not the one who bumped into us."

Rail's scars still pulled his mouth into a lopsided smile, and he tilted his head to look at the man with a little wonder. "...Well, actually, you're pretty brave to talk to us normally."

"Ah, if you mean your scars or his height – such factors would never be obstacles in my conversations with others. Though I suppose others may beg to differ," he answered.

"Really...most people would think we were monsters."

"I have a friend who is a doctor, and he has more scars than even you do. Most of the time he wraps himself in bandages. And as for your friend here, I know of the existence of many other giants," the man said conversationally. "For example, in Alton, in the south of Illinois, there is a young man named [Robert](#). Although I have never seen him in person, I have heard that he is 240 centimetres tall at only sixteen years old, and his height is increasing at a rate of ten centimetres per year." And thus he explained the case of what would later be a world record – a man over three metres tall.

"Uh, is that so."

"....."

Frank was speechless with amazement, but Rail still seemed unwilling to trust this man. Before he could object, though, he heard Carol's timid voice.

"Uh, um...I'm very sorry...I'm sorry that I bumped into you and then screamed..."

Rail glanced at the camera around her neck and her despondent air, and chuckled and patted her on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it. When I first saw you, I totally thought you were a thief and stole that camera."

“O-oh!”

“Just kidding.”

Rail had a childish smile on his face and this brought up Carol short. She pouted in indignation and didn’t know whether to laugh or to be angry.

“Hey...! You’re being kind of mean you know,” she said. She no longer felt as nervous as before, and decided to apologize again. “I’m sorry, my name is Carol! Would you like to have lunch? As redress for my behaviour?”

“Huh?” Rail had never been invited out by anyone before. He had tried to stick by Huey’s command of lying low, and so tried not to display himself and his scars before other people. Frank was the same way. If he wasn’t working on a mission, he just holed up in Huey’s “cottage.”

Frank brightened at the suggestion of a meal, but then his face fell. “B-but...restaurants don’t have chairs that fit me...”

Carol didn’t think that this was a problem. She seemed to have gotten over Frank’s size, and gave him a brilliant and innocent smile. “That’s quite all right. We can get sandwiches and eat them in that square over there,” she said in a mature and firm tone.

“Really? Okay then, I won’t say no to that.”

“I – I’m a big eater though...so it will cost a lot...”

Carol saw one beaming and the other hesitant, and puffed out her chest confidently. “Don’t worry! Mr. Saint Germain looks the way he does, but he’s actually the vice-president of a newspaper company! He’s really generous!”

“Ah...”

In response to this glowing introduction, the man peered at them from behind his monocle, rubbed his chin, and said coldly, “...you aren’t saying that I will be paying the bill?”

(Russo Mansion)

“I’m leaving now, Miss Lua. If you want me to bring anything next time, please tell me.”

With these quiet parting words, Ricardo Russo shut the door softly behind him.

The hall that Ricardo was in had many doors, and at the end of the hallway, there was a Russo family honcho sitting on guard. The family only assigned one person to guard this place, but when he needed to use the washroom, he would call someone else to take his place, so the hallway always had someone sitting in guard.

The guard had his legs crossed and was holding a newspaper, but above the newspaper, his eyes were fixed on Ricardo.

Christopher, who was waiting for Ricardo just outside the main door, looked at the guard and yawned.

The woman in the room was Lua, a supposed “guest.” Christopher supposed that it wasn’t very nice to lock guests up, but he didn’t feel particularly sympathetic towards her. He didn’t really know what her

background was. She should probably try to escape, but it seemed that she never showed any inclination to escape.

Ricardo was responsible for taking care of her, but Christopher thought that he probably didn't know that she was a hostage.

"She's been here a week, right?"

"Yes. If it were me, I don't think I could bear being all alone like that. And for so long."

"Hey c'mon, have some backbone. If you go to prison one day, you'd flip."

"Whatever you like." Ricardo brushed Christopher's comments off smoothly and assumed a cold expression. "I don't plan on becoming a part of the mafia – and anyway, the family will die in my grandfather's time."

"Really?"

"I've said before – both my parents are dead."

"Right. I think I recall you mentioning something like that," Christopher said, not at all uncomfortable with the topic. "Remind me how they died?"

Ricardo wasn't at all sad or angry. His tone was frank and light even though it was a serious matter.

"Explosives. Blown to smithereens by a car bomb."

It would seem like a joke if Ricardo's gaze and posture didn't indicate otherwise.

"Ahahahaha! You haven't changed, you know, still talking like that. Don't you think it's better to at least pretend you're upset? But hey, I'm no expert."

"It doesn't matter...sympathy won't make them come back to life."

The mention of Ricardo's parents didn't bring any changes in his demeanor, but his breathing seemed a little erratic, and the two lapsed into silence.

Christopher didn't mind the silence, but it was Ricardo who asked a question to change the mood.

"Well, what about you, Chris? Where is your family?"

"If you mean the blood-related sort, then I don't have any. And never did to begin with...so to tell you the truth, I don't get any of what you feel about your parents' death, and I don't know what to feel either. But then again, human being read novels and stuff all the time, and even though they've never experienced the story world firsthand, they can still be touched by that world. So I think one day I'd be able to understand. And actually, I have a bunch of companions, like a family. My dream is that one day, when someone asks me what is most important to me, I could readily answer that it's my family."

"Seems a bit sanctimonious."

"It suits something like me...but you won't understand, Ricardo."

The pair rounded a corner in the hallway as their strange conversation went on.

Christopher had been here for about a year, but he never brought up his personal matters unless asked, and Ricardo didn't say anything about his past either. But sometimes, when Ricardo did ask, Christopher answered without hesitation.

Ricardo had seen him almost murdered anyway, so there was not much point hiding anything. Still, he didn't talk about everything – he didn't mention name the homunculi or the elixir of immortality.

“Hm...the family you speak of, are they the Lamia?”

“Yeah, pretty much. To tell the truth, I want to be one family with the entire Earth, but sadly the blood that runs through my veins is not the same as hers.”

“Sometimes you say strange things, Christopher.”

Christopher knew that Ricardo was looking at him with cool detachment but laughed anyway. “Really? I have a pal called Chi, and he often says that too.”

“.....and still Mr. Chi is your friend. He must be a good person.”

“I think so too.”

--- That's right – how have Chi and everyone else been doing lately?

The moment that this thought occurred to Christopher, Ricardo stopped and pointed towards the front hall. “I need to buy some books for Miss Lua, and I need to go to the city centre anyway.”

“Oh, all right. The girl seems a little down, so giving her some books to read sounds like a good idea.”

As Christopher answered, he realized that he hasn't gone out for a very long time.

Basically, his job was to protect Ricardo. However, for the sake of Ricardo's image, he never accompanied Ricardo to school. Ricardo never allowed anyone else to accompany him, so Christopher spent most of his time watching Ricardo going to school from a distance. But when he went out for personal business, like now, Ricardo often brought Christopher along.

Christopher had once tried to counsel Ricardo: “If other people see you with me, you won't be able to make any friends.” And Ricardo returned with, “I'm the grandson of the Russo family, and this fact alone pushes people away.”

And so began the remarkable relationship between the creature who stood apart from the world and the youth who stood apart from society. Although this “normal” life was a little boring, this didn't bother Christopher too much.

He didn't get out much, but it was enough for him to banter with Ricardo and flip through some of the volumes at the bookstore.

--- Hmm...The Twins haven't contacted me for a while...maybe it's because I don't get out much.

The Twins were another entity working for Huey, and they were responsible for delivering new orders. Others ranged far and wide across the country, but the Twins could appear suddenly before them to tell them what Huey wanted them to know.

Supposedly, the Twins were composed of a “Sham” and a “Hilton,” one male and one female, working together. But even Christopher didn't know exactly what they really were.

They lead an incredible existence – no matter what kind of circumstances the rest of Huey's team were confronted with, as long as they called upon the Twins, they would receive a response. But each time it would be a different person responding. It was the same way during the Mist Wall incident – supposedly everyone being able to retreat safely was due to Sham's help.

They could be everywhere.

This was what Christopher had thought about them before. But it looked like the remote Chicago suburbs were another matter.

Another way of thinking about it was that he (Sham) and she (Hilton) appeared where Huey thought important.

--- So maybe they think that I'm not useful anymore?

The reason that he could accept such a bloodless and peaceful life was probably because he had been soundly beaten by a mere human being. If they thought that his fighter and killer's instinct had evaporated, then there was nothing he could do. And so Huey and his erstwhile companions no longer concerned themselves with him.

He tried to think of it this way, but still felt a little upset.

--- Hm, it might not be so bad watching Ricardo grow up. And who knows, maybe I can help him grow into a great leader of his family.

“My ideal crime lord is someone who loves nature...and can sing really well...fly like a bird ...lift a car with one hand...swill red wine in one hand, and has thirty lovers at once...”

Ricardo ignored the contents of Christopher's rambling. “...what are you mumbling about? Let's go.”

He went out the door and Christopher hurriedly moved to follow him, but then a deep voice rang out.

“And where might you be going, Christopher?”

Christopher turned to see Placido and several henchmen.

“Master Ricardo wants to go out and buy something, so I'm accompanying him.”

“Really...” Compared to when he spoke to Ricardo, Christopher's tone was slightly more impatient, but Placido didn't seem to have detected the difference. “I don't know much about your capabilities, but we are going to get busy, so be prepared.”

“Right.”

“A problem person is going to finish his jail term soon...and when he does, he might target Ricardo. My blood runs through my grandson's veins, and if he receives any wounds, you can prepare for a wound a thousand times deeper. In the same place. With a red-hot iron poker.”

“A thousand times deeper? Wouldn't that go right through my body and burn down the whole house?”

Christopher's words seemed to be a reminder that he was working for Ricardo and not Placido, and he turned and left the house without looking back at Placido once.

Placido just stood where he was, but one of his henchmen spoke up. “Sir, might it be a problem if Master Ricardo is accompanied by someone like that?”

“Hm...don't worry about them. And it's not like Ricardo lets anyone near him other than that creature.” A satisfied smile appeared on Placido's face. “And anyway, I'm less concerned about my grandson now, and more about my own body.”

One corner of his lips rose further as he continued this thought in his heart.

--- The elixir of immortality.

--- I'd be able to conquer the final frontier of ageing.

--- And so there's no point of leaving an heir.

The Wrigley Building was divided into the North building and the South building, and these two were bridged by a vaulted walkway.

There was a square under the walkway made from the space between the buildings, and many pedestrians would leave the busy street for a respite there.

“Really, when you walk on the street, you must look and see what is ahead. Imagine what would happen if you had damaged your camera. As a photographer, you only receive 100 points.”

“Could you tell me out of how many...?”

“Twenty-six million, seven hundred and eighty-three thousand, four hundred and nineteen points.”

“You don't need to be so precise you know!”

“Furthermore, I will contact accounting so they may deduct the money for the hotdogs from your salary. Be prepared.”

“Ohhhhh nooooooo.”

Carol almost teared up at this and stopped, but Frank, with Rail on his shoulder, was close behind her.

Rail already looked like a rag doll, and on Frank's shoulders he looked like a ventriloquist's puppet. Frank's broad shoulder was like a bench, and Rail felt that he was walking on air.

Frank's cheerful voice came from below. “I, um...Do you think I can find this Mr. Robert you mentioned? And ask him to be friends?”

“I doubt Huey old man would let you meet up with him.”

“I...I see...”

“Whatever, you can find Christopher right? He has ‘Wanna be friends’ syndrome, and he'll naturally be friends with anything that talks to him.”

“Yeah, but Christopher...” Frank sounded doubtful.

In response, Rail shot him a big, confident grin. “He's still alive. He's still definitely alive somewhere. He's practically a vampire, and if he snuffs it so easily, we'd have gotten a mission to rescue him a long time ago. Or he would have died in that lab in the first place.”

Frank seemed somewhat reassured by Rail's manner, and nodded in agreement. But the “lab” that Rail mentioned seemed to have brought back unpleasant memories, and he shuddered so much that Rail found it hard to stay balanced.

Frank seemed to want to change the subject. "H-hey, you sure it's all right? Letting them buy so many hotdogs?"

"Nah, don't worry about it," Rail said. "You're the king of bottomless pits, and if there's free food on offer, you might as well go for it. And don't you think destiny is at work? We were just talking about someone named St. Germain, and then we bumped into a St. Germain!"

Both turned to look at the mountain of hotdogs in Gustav St. Germain's hands, their eyes glowing.

But then Frank's face fell. "B-but...Rail...is he a good guy?" He asked in a tremulous voice.

"...? Sure, why not? He bought us lunch, right?"

"B-but aren't we acting as bait or something...? We shouldn't involve them, right?"

Frank thought of how they bumped into each other and started worrying about Carol and St. Germain's safety. Before they met, when he had been talking to Rail, he wasn't the slightest worried about anyone else's safety. It looked like he would care about another person's fate if he knew them personally.

Rail, who had just wanted to wipe entire cities off the map, spoke up. "No worries, Frank. Think about it for a sec. It's not like someone would attack us in broad daylight. Any sane guy would trail us from afar, wait until the dead of night, and mount a sneak attack when we're sleeping. And my plan is to stay alert then and foil his plan! It's not like we're going to follow Carol and them to their house, so we aren't gonna involve them at all."

Frank was the most worried about Carol, and it seemed to him that Rail's plan was full of holes. But then he savoured the smell of hotdogs wafting his way and decided to think about it no more. Filling his stomach came first.

Events a while later proved that his judgement was faulty. Rail's plan was indeed full of holes.

And the biggest hole:

Their enemy wasn't sane at all.

(The bridge over the Chicago River)

"Over here, Boss."

"Chicago is very beautiful today too...Don't you think so?"

Graham heard Shaft call him from up ahead, but he lowered his head. "Oh, what sadness!"

There was a bunch of men walking across the bridge, and they raised their voices in a mournful cry. "Argh, why does he always fall into a state of depression? C'mon, get yourself out of it...it's a bad habit. Won't you think it's developing into a self-hypnotic state?"

Graham was walking in their midst. He raised his head and looked with half-open and tear-filled eyes at the skyscrapers of Chicago. "Look...The Wrigley Building on the left...isn't it the purest white and shiniest building you ever saw?"

A sound of deep sentimentality escaped his throat, but none of his companions were really listening. Because they all knew it would be a waste of time.

“And the Tribune Tower to the right carries a Gothic beauty! Ahhh...ahh...both sides are almost equally beautiful! When two entirely different architectural styles fill one’s vision at the same moment, it is like two different eras melding together with this city...! Tragic...how deeply tragic!”

“...How come it’s tragic?”

Shaft was just asking a casual question, but Graham’s answer immediately howled in his ear.

“The azure of the sky reaches peak harmony with both of them! Perfect! I have no knowledge of art, but even so I can feel ‘Wow, it’s beautiful,’ so this proves that everything is truly beautiful, right? But...but! What do you suppose I thought of next? I thought ‘There’s a lot here worth taking apart.’ Isn’t that ridiculous? Why would I want to destroy something so beautiful? Am I such a nihilist? And a ten metre-long wrench suddenly appeared in my mind and took apart the beautiful scene...why’s that? Where do I want to go? To apologize! Apologize to the people living in those buildings and to their designers, Graham! Dammit...I have recognized that my mind isn’t at all normal – is there anything more tragic than this revelation?”

“You know, I think compared to you, we lot are facing a bigger tragedy...”

A blue uniform plus a giant wrench.

He cut a figure that seemed likely to be immediately reported to the police, but he still let out a howl.

The pedestrians on the bridge left a greater distance between themselves and Graham than they did for Rail and Frank. They didn’t meet his eyes and scooted by him as fast as they could.

(Central Square, The Wrigley Building)

“Oh – both of you belonged to the circus?”

“Yep, travelling carnival and all over the country. Frank and I got given away because of what we look like.”

“Really...”

“Hey, don’t feel bad. I don’t. I suppose our lives were pretty happy ‘cuz of it.”

Rail grinned and spun tale after tale and Carol ate it all up. Carol listened to his stories with rapt attention and often cut in with innocent words of praise.

“That’s so cool! That’s splendid! I really admire you, you know. And um...if you don’t mind, could I interview you sometime?”

“Ahaha, if the ringmaster says okay, then sure.” Rail thought of Huey and began badmouthing him without hesitation. “But he’s kind of a jerk – he never considers whether he’s upsetting other people, so be prepared.”

On the other hand, Frank was using his enormous jaws eating hotdogs non-stop. The vice-president was sipping tea that he had bought from the hotdog stand, so Rail and Carol took up most of the conversation.

Carol had gotten used to Rail’s scars in a very short time, and stared at his face as he spoke.

After a while, Rail started adding a few truths, perhaps because he felt sorry for the gullible Carol.

“And me, I’m responsible for gunpowder and explosives.”

“Oh, ex...plosives?”

“Yep, we use pyrotechnics a lot you know, like human cannons, jumping through circles of flame, the magician uses a lot of it too, like for that trick where he escapes from an exploding trunk, right? I’m the one who arranges this stuff.”

“Wow! That’s awesome! You look only about my age, but you already have such an important job!”

Maybe Carol’s two brightly shining eyes cheered Rail up, because he added a couple more truths. “I like gunpowder...I suppose it’s influences from my upbringing...”

“Your upbringing?”

“Yeah, I mean the carn...yeah, I love gunpowder. Imagine – a bunch of nameless crystals, liquids, or a pile of mush – all they need is a light and they can erupt. They leave no trace afterwards, but all the explosion and fire can turn heads just like that, right?”

Rail’s voice was level, but there was a hint of excitement in his face. It wasn’t a sarcastic smile, but a genuine smile of joy from his heart.

“That’s right – they can disappear in a moment...and no one will deign to remember the name of gunpowder. But in that moment, that split second, ‘There’s been an explosion’ – this memory, the sound, the light, they’ll all be deeply etched in everyone’s mind for as long as they live. Or...if you’re hurt in an explosion, you’d likewise feel it for as long as you live.”

“That’s a scary example.”

“Ahahaha, yeah, I suppose.” Rail saw Carol’s wry smile and laughed. “Anyway, rumour has it that there’s a bomber in Chicago who’s elevated it to an art. I want to surpass this person – that’s my goal.”

“A bomber?”

“Uh-huh. And she’s become an urban legend – it’s a bomber chick and she has really great control over explosives. She once chose a building about to be demolished and levelled it before the demolisher arrived...and another time she was experimenting with explosives by a lakeshore, and changed the whole shape of the coast. They had to redraw the map...and oh, I heard that when she bombs a building, she can do it so that all the surrounding buildings are perfectly intact, what do you think of that!”

Such tales were only the stuff of urban legend, but Carol sucked it all up as if they were true. She hadn’t even spent a year as assistant in a newspaper publisher, but in this year she had heard of and experienced a myriad of strange occurrences. Because of her experience, she chose to accept Rail’s story, and believed that they at least contained a kernel of truth.

“Well, isn’t she a troublemaker then...”

“Yeah, I guess. And it’s not like the newspapers ever reports these things, so we can’t tell whether they’re really true or not. I’d love to meet her if I have the chance. But I have no idea what she looks like.”

“Yes, that would be a problem...”

---Maybe I can find a clue back in the office.

Carol was just about to tell Rail her plan, but then a voice sounded between them, deep and clear at once.

“What a tragedy...tell me another tragic story.”

“Huh...?

Carol and Rail turned to face the voice and saw what seemed to be a blue pole.

Beside the flower plot stood a young man in a blue work uniform, looking at them with sad eyes.

“If this bomber you speak of is that woman with the eyepatch...she’s not here anymore. She went to New York.”

“...Who’re you?” Rail asked sharply, but the man just raised a giant wrench that had been slung at his waist. Then he began speaking in a theatrical tone, though it was slightly different from how the Poet spoke.

“And what is even more tragic...is that even if you do make it to New York, you still need to walk a while with me. Such is human life, full of twists and turns. It really is a dismal and woeful story.”

---Is he our enemy?

Having an enemy pop up in broad daylight was not something that Rail had expected, and this person was now pointing what was obviously a weapon right at them.

Before he could figure out the correct reaction, Carol, who was sitting beside him and turning pale with fright, started screaming.

“EEEEEEAAAAAAAH---!”

She yanked on Rail’s arm and hauled him to hide behind the vice-president in an effort to get farther away from the young man.

“The robber on the train!” Carol screamed. “Mr. Vice-president! He’s the robber from the train!”

The young man looked at Carol and St. Germain, and seemed to be thinking.

And then he looked as if he remembered something.

“Hmm.....? Eh? What....? Huh?”

Graham’s gang, headed by Shaft, watched this unfold from afar and all shivered.

“Hey, what the heck...the Boss’s started it for real.”

“And there’s tons of people on that big one anyway, so what’s he thinking of?”

“Cuz he can’t think of a plan like trailing them in secret, not with his brain...but anyway, there’s somethin’ even worse.”

Shaft, the only one who still looked calm, stared at the two figures standing beside their targets and let out a tired sigh.

“I already told you lot that on the way here, we tried to pull a train heist, right?

“Yep, so you did.”

“Other than the Boss, we all tried to chisel some off that dude with the monocle.”

“Okay...and then?”

The members of the gang who were on the train all looked a bit green. The others saw this and roughly guessed the outcome, but they still wanted to know the details.

And the details were pretty much what they guessed. Shaft rubbed his chin and recalled how painful it was.

“We got pounded. Well, other than the Boss...he had all of us kissing the ground in a few short seconds. I swear by our reputation that he’s a ninja or something.”

“And afterwards, it felt like he and Boss were fated to meet...so here we are.”

Meanwhile, Graham was looking at the two journalists that he had met ten days ago and spinning his giant wrench with an expression of bafflement.

“Really...and who are we here? The information brokers from the train? Hm...Are you two ‘the Poet’ and ‘Sickle’ then...? Is that it? Novels always have villains with alter egos, so on top of being reporters, you’re Huey’s servants too?”

Graham took out the wanted poster from a breast pocket and compared the descriptions to the four people before him. “This mister here does fit the description of being ‘pompous in his speech’...so this girl’s the capoeira master then? All right, show me some capoeira moves!”

Carol started at Graham’s challenge and started trembling, and couldn’t help yelling back. “Ca...capo what? I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Eh...? The capoeira master says she doesn’t know capoeira! What trick are we playing? I see...is it like riding a bicycle...it’s not a piece of knowledge but a habit, is that so? Hold on, I just lied. I know it’s not you two...but how can you expect me to accept this reality? What good will it do me...what good indeed? Hey, girl, answer my question!”

“What? How should I know?” Carol was still trembling and cowering behind the vice-president.

Rail and Frank were watching this take place with entirely different expressions. Frank was staring blankly at Graham, whereas Rail’s face was clouded with anger.

--- Don’t call me Huey’s servant!

It was obvious that Rail was upset, but he bit back what he was about to say with great effort.

Rail didn’t know exactly what made Carol start screaming, but it looked like this new arrival was some kind of thief.

--- Why would a common lowlife have a wanted poster of us?

He tried to calm down and process everything rationally.

From the conversation between the young man and Carol, Rail thought that he was none too bright, and perhaps he was indeed a common lowlife. If this was true, it looked like their enemy was giving away wanted posters to any number of brainless thugs in order to capture them.

The thing to do was probably to defeat this thug and interrogate him, and find out who was behind it all. Going with them was another option, but if there was a squad of hired guns awaiting them, then he and Frank would be dead.

--- I wish we had Christopher. Or even just Chi and Leeza – they're not afraid of bullets.

--- I've got it.

Rail, who had been busily calculating all this time, arrived at a plan.

--- We'll pretend to go quietly, and then beat them senseless halfway there, and bring them to where the Poet and everyone else are.

They were just common thugs anyways, so they probably won't put up much of a fight.

Rail put on a smile. "And if we don't?"

"I will not accept such a tragic answer."

Rail glared at the thug shaking his head and swinging his wrench and sighed. "You needn't look so freaky, mister. We'll go along with you, no worries...Frank!"

Frank heard Rail and swallowed the rest of his hotdogs, and swung Rail onto his shoulder.

"R-Rail...Frank..."

Carol was still totally confused and looked at the two of them, worried. But Rail just smiled a little wistfully. "Hey, Carol, thanks a lot. We didn't get to chat for long, but I haven't talked to a normal girl for a long while, you know...now that I think about it, I never have."

"Th-the hotdogs were delicious too."

They both finished expressing their gratitude, but Rail lowered his head in thought, and then spoke in a low voice. "Um...I guess this is a warning...um...it's kind of hard to put into words."

He didn't know exactly what the details of their mission was, but since he was here for some purpose and did care about what happened to this girl, he decided to at least tell her something.

"You'd better leave Chicago as soon as you can."

"I think there's going to be a huge explosion here."

Carol watched Rail and Frank being led away by the young man in blue, and felt completely at a loss.

She didn't know whether she should have prevented them from leaving or whether she should have called for help. But before the left, Rail had told her "Hey, don't worry," and this paralyzed her.

She turned for help. "Mr. Vice-president..."

"Well...since they said they would depart, it is not our place to make them remain. I say, if they had not been willing to go, I would not have remained a motionless bystander. However it looks as if they have other plans. If you are so worried, why not follow?"

"B-but..."

"If you have no thought of following, then you must adopt the role of a journalist and consider this event from afar. Of course, some reporters venture to the front lines to learn what is closer to the truth. Which professional attitude one chooses depends on one's feelings and values. But of course we wish that our staff do not hold values contrary to the advancement of the company."

The vice-president's voice was calm as usual. He looked at the already-blurry outline of Frank's giant figure and sought to calm Carol down as well. "And I doubt either of them would readily take insult or injury so easily."

"Wh...?"

"And also, Carol, we must remain in Chicago for a while longer."

"Wait, what do you mean? I thought the plan was to go back to New York tomorrow?"

--- Does Mr. Vice-president want to rescue them?

There was a bit of yearning in Carol's heart for a superhero to solve all her problems, but in the vice-president's eyes there was only the usual sharp glare, like an assassin.

"I predict that certain events shall take place here, and there is time before our departure to enter into the fray. Anyway, it should prove most interesting."

"...Aren't you contradicting yourself?"

"That is because I am the type to chase a story to the front lines. It is just that the front lines may not be where the two of them were headed."

The vice-president said this without a shred of hesitation, and Carol shivered. "Um...I suppose you won't say something like 'Since we're not in danger yet, you'd better leave first'?"

"Would you like me to?"

"Absolutely not!" Carol answered loudly, but then felt slightly sorry for herself.

The vice-president looked at the young intern and explained, "True, I was thinking about whether to send you back first, however I decided that it might be more dangerous if you were alone."

"?"

Carol was just about to ask what he meant by this, but a real-life explanation beat her to it.

While everyone had been staring at Frank's huge figure retreat into the distance, a man had sidled up to Carol and sat down beside her.

There was a scar on his face and he looked like a shady character. He unfolded a sheaf of newspaper with one hand.

Then, with his other hand, he opened one flap of his coat behind the newspaper, just wide enough for Carol and the vice-president to see the metallic gleam of a gun in an inner pocket.

“How ‘bout you come with me.”

He sounded conversational and his eyes remained trained on the newspaper.

“If you got nothing to do with them two...”

--- Would you let us go? Carol thought. B-but that means Rail and Frank are in trouble...

But her worries were entirely misplaced.

Klik tossed the cigarette that he had been smoking to the ground and showed them an evil grin.

“Then hope you don’t mind – it just ain’t your lucky day.”

“M-Mr. Vice-president...”

Carol was frightened out of her wits, but the vice-president stood, fully cooperative, and maintained an even tone of voice. “Carol, I hope that the courage with which you yelled ‘Absolutely not’ earlier could persist until the time it shall be truly tested.”

Then his lips twisted into a sour smile and spoke in a voice only Carol could hear. “What is happening now might not even be the beginning.”

Rail seized the chance to ask the ultimate question when he and Frank were led into a small, empty alley far from the Wrigley Building.

“All right, blue bro, where’re we off to?”

At first there was only the guy in blue, but then as they walked farther and farther away from the Wrigley building, more people joined them. Now Rail and Frank were surrounded by five or six men.

The young man in blue didn’t stop or slow down, but turned as he walked to answer. “Sadly, I can’t divulge where we’re going...However, there is something I can tell you, which is that I am called Graham. Graham Specter.”

“No one asked for your name.”

“Ah, how tragic. You don’t seem the slightest bit interested in me. But...but! An insuppressible urge rises to report my name when I think of what I shall do with you!”

“Wh-what are you gonna do?” Frank stuttered.

Graham let the wrench fall on his shoulder. “You two...you’re Rail and Frank, am I right?”

“Right, but we don’t have last names,” Rail said with a self-deprecating smile.

“Is that so...” Graham nodded. “Excellent. I just thought, what if I only found out now that I took in the wrong people?”

“Okay, so what does this have to do with telling us your name?”

“It’s obvious...don’t you think it’s discourteous to ask for someone else’s name before you give your own? I can’t believe you need to ask – wait, did you ask because you think I lack common sense? Is it? Is it because of this uniform? Is this blue work uniform the crux of the problem? I assure you, this is my attire whether it’s a work day or a statutory holiday...but do you find it discomfiting...? I wash and change between three sets of uniforms every day, you know!”

An answer both innocent and idiotic.

Rail had been brought up short by Graham’s monologue at first, but he collected himself and gave a sarcastic laugh. “Ahahaha, hey, bro, you’ve already kidnapped us, so why bother with politeness?”

“Kidnapping? Is this...kidnapping? Is that what you believe...? Though in this situation, your perceptions hold sway. I suppose that taking you with no possibility of an exposition does fit the definition of kidnapping...Oh dear oh dear, have I really fallen at last? Fallen...or perhaps I will fall soon? Fall to where? Hell? But who decided Hell was below ground? Isn’t that awfully unjust to both above and below? Let me think...people used to believe that the Earth was the centre of the world and the universe turned around this point. In another words, if this is true, to fall means to descend into the centre of the earth! Oh god, this means that the erstwhile world actually spun around Hell...how deeply, deeply tragic...how bleak...”

Graham had fallen into his own world.

Rail watched as the young man in blue fell to his knees and started weeping. Rail patted him on the shoulder and offered gentle words of comfort, words unlike those a child of his age would say.

“It’s all right...let it out. We forgive you.”

“Oh...having a child like you give me absolution seems to drag me further into the sadness of Hell. But I thank you nevertheless...thank you...”

Rail shook his head. “Think nothing of it. You aren’t really all that sad,” and then he added, as if as an offhand comment, “So...who was it exactly told you to look for us?

“Who it is won’t change the sad fact of my existence...and to be thought so little of, that you could use such an unrefined method to extract information from me – this only adds to my tragedy. Alas, why must I descend into such despair?”

Rail gave a childlike smile and stuck out his tongue. “Ahahaha...I guess you aren’t so easily fooled.” But then his smile seemed to have some malice behind it. “All right, it looks like force is the only way.”

“What?”

As Graham raised his head, Rail signalled to Frank. “Frank, let’s begin.”

“Oh, okay. Got it.”

The giant toddler nodded twice –

And with a move so fast no one saw what happened, he kicked Graham into the air.

Graham, who didn't see it coming at all, nearly bit off his tongue.

--- What? What's happening to me?

The force that struck one side of his body a moment ago suddenly lanced throughout his whole being, sending shockwaves through his bones and flesh.

Immediately following this pain was a feeling that he was being jerked downwards.

--- Strange, am I falling sideways?

A second strike hit just as this thought formed in Graham's mind.

Graham's body smashed into the wall of a building, though he managed to focus his vision as he slid down the wall.

The person he saw first was Frank, but Frank was miraculously the size of a normal child. Then he realized that Frank had sent him flying a considerable distance away.

--- How far was that?

“What – What the hell are you doing?”

Rail and Frank had sprang into action, though it might be more accurate to say they took advantage of the situation and moved by stealth. Yells of protest rose from Graham's gang.

Some of these gang members had drawn their daggers, but Rail just looked at them, unperturbed, and just turned to give Frank more instructions. “I think you can handle them all by yourself, but let me lend a hand anyway. Give me my stuff.”

“Oh, sure.” As instructed, Frank reached down to his enormous waist, removed the backpack, and handed it to Rail.

The bag looked a lot bigger in the hands of someone as small as Rail. He pulled a coat from the bag and started to put it on with a leisurely air.

But of course, as Rail and Frank were having this exchange, Graham's gang also moved. More of them had drawn their daggers, and now they all lunged forwards.

“You little bastard, you've got time to –”

But he never finished his sentence. Smack. He was knocked senseless.

Frank's giant palm had swatted him away, and his body turned a few graceful arcs in the air before landing.

Confronted by this shocking turn of events, all the men stopped dead. They had numbers, but in this situation numbers didn't seem to count for much.

They couldn't escape either, so their only path was to advance, surrounding Rail and Frank in a slowly tightening circle.

“Um...maybe getting farther away would be nice.”

“Sure, go for it.”

Rail was still putting on his coat, but Frank suddenly hefted him up –

One of Frank’s pillar-like legs kicked off from the ground with a surprisingly light movement.

A whirlwind seemed to howl in the alley, and Frank’s massive figure bowled between the gang like a giant cannon ball.

“What...” The gang’s eyes collectively widened in disbelief. They couldn’t believe what they saw. Frank was twenty metres away and putting Rail back down on the ground.

A realization finally sunk in – regardless of whether Frank was using his hands or his legs, his movements were so fast that they couldn’t see it coming.

His speed exceeded the motion capture of the human eye. The fact that Frank was huge but could still move with baffling lightness made them feel that his whole body was like a giant engine.

Big meant heavy. This is what they had believed. So, faced with a contradiction, they could only stare open-mouthed with their hands hanging at their sides.

A few civilians were passing through the alley and saw what seemed like miracles. They either ran away in fear or stayed to watch the events unfold. Now their gaze shifted from Frank to Rail, who had finally finished putting on his coat.

The coat looked like some kind of uniform, though it also looked like it was made from a sack. It differed from Graham’s uniform in two ways.

First, its cut was different. Rail’s coat had longer sleeves, and it was loose, with the bottom hugging Rail’s knees. It almost looked like a lab coat.

The second was the colour.

The fabric looked like it was woven from silver threads, and reflected the light coming from all sides. Rail, who already looked like a doll, now looked even more like a figurine in a dollhouse.

“What, scared yet?” Rail seemed to be lost in a kind of personal reverie, though a hint of cruelty peeked through his smile.

The gang thought that Rail was talking about his clothing, but his next words shattered this expectation. “Frank’s nimble moves scared you eh? You must’ve thought that he was slow, from the way he looks and talks. Haha! Talk about reality hitting you like a ton of bricks.”

As the gang recalled how astonishing Frank’s moves had been, Rail giggled, as if amused how their pursuers now looked like they were choking on their own tongues. “But hey, it’s not that strange if you think about it. Sharks in the ocean are pretty big, but they can swim real fast too. Did you know that even crocodiles can get up to forty kilometres per hour? But on the other hand, rabbits – and they seem pretty fast and nimble, don’t they – they still meet their end in the jaws of lions and tigers, and they’re ten times bigger than rabbits. So how could you think that Frank was slow? Ahahahaha! Ahahahaha!”

Laughter. Loud, crazed laughter.

But after this barrage of seeming nonsense and peals of laughter, Rail suddenly stopped, and his lips curled into a cruel smile once more. “Hey, you mean you really don’t know why I just told you all that?”

Graham's gang, who had been rooted to the spot by a series of unexpected developments, now found that events took another turn.

It was in the centre of the circle they had formed.

There was a strange object where Rail and Frank had been standing. It was a misshapen object attached to a clock.

The best description would be that it looked like an egg, and the clock in front of it was ticking. The sound made all the gang shudder with a nameless sense of disquiet.

As if to give their fear substance, Rail spoke, but his voice was quiet. "We only need to interrogate one person. That Graham guy is enough."

Rail's smile augured something nasty, and behind him, Frank was covering his ears and trying to make himself smaller.

"So you lot...hm...you lot can blow."

The hand in the clock ticked one last time, landing in the 12 position.

The blue sky above the small Chicago alley was rocked with a harsh and resounding explosion.

Interlude: The Boundaries of Alcatraz

(Alcatraz)

It was a maximum-security prison to house the most problematic prisoners. If they caused even more trouble while they were doing time, then they would be sent down to the solitary confinement cells, dubbed “the Dungeons.”

The space of the Dungeons had been used to store equipment when Alcatraz had been a fortress, so it was totally bricked up and there was no light at all. If prisoners misbehaved, they would be thrust into this darkness.

But bricks weren’t as hard as concrete, so there was the possibility that some prisoners might try to tunnel their way out. So, in addition to the darkness, the prisoners’ feet would be shackled.

And deeper than this darkness, a place where the prison blueprints did not divulge, the ultimate bottomless depths –

He was there, and so was she.

It might have been used for storage, or perhaps it had been used to house political prisoners, but no one knew for sure. And now it because a prison cell, constructed for one man alone.

As a cell, it was rather spacious – about the size of a small hotel suite. It was furnished with a bed and a running tap. Like other regular cells, there were soap and a metal mug and other daily amenities. What was different from other cells in the Dungeon, though, was that there was a brightly lit lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. It would decrease the chances of prisoners going mad.

Even the prison guards rarely ventured into this area. It wasn’t a great place to be even for them, and much less so for little girls.

But here, Leeza Laforet led her quiet “existence.”

The space had a more lived-in feel now that it contained Huey and a lively child. It was still a cell, though, and a child still looked out of place.

Leeza seemed like she wanted to draw attention to her presence. “Papa, Papa, how long are you gonna let Rail carry on like this?”

In response, her “Papa” – Huey Laforet – gave a small smile from his chair. “Carry on? What do you mean?”

“He ran off to act as bait, and totally drew attention to himself, and yesterday he said tons of mean things about Papa too! Please please let me kill him! Pretty pleeeease?”

Leeza pulled on a corner of Huey’s clothing like a petulant child demanding candy. But Huey still had his little smile, and patted Leeza’s head. “I can’t let you do that, Leeza. He’s an important comrade for you, you know.”

“Pooh! I don’t want comrades like him!”

“All right, let me find another approach,” Huey reasoned. He paused, and his smile grew a little softer. “He’s one of Papa’s most important test subjects, so Leeza can’t break him.”

“Aw~...but....”

“And also, he will grow up, so in the future he might become a more social individual. Perhaps he might even learn to be grateful to me.” Huey’s voice sounded cheerful enough, but his smile indicated that he never expected this to really happen.

Then Huey rose out of his chair to ask Leeza about how his plans were progressing. “Well, then, has everyone arrived in Chicago?”

“Yep! But no one’s seen Chris...”

“Yes, that is unfortunate. He’s been missing for a year...perhaps it’s time to give up.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Their tone of voice sounded like they were discussing a pen they had lost, and didn’t seem to feel genuinely sorry for Chris. Then Huey left the matter of Christopher and turned to his plans. “I believe that the immortal Victor is sending shall be arriving soon. I will choose a timely opportunity and call him down for a visit...however, it might be wiser to set my plans in motion before that. So far, it looks like Victor will take the bait in New York. The experiment shall begin after everything is in its place.”

Although he never mentioned details about this “experiment,” Leeza still nodded vigorously. But she still seemed to be preoccupied with Rail.

“But~. Rail still doesn’t know his place! When we were talking about Chris being missing, he almost cried, but then he was still saying nasty things about Papa!”

“That is because when I treated Rail cruelly, it was Christopher, Frank, and Adele that gave him solace. And especially Christopher – in the beginning, I believe the one who talked to Rail the most was Christopher.”

“And he’s been sounding more and more like Chris. It’s so dumb!”

Huey sat back down on his chair. “And that is because Rail is still a child. He is easily influenced by those he interacts with.” He sounded rather happy about this, and closed his eyes. The image of Rail, with his body full of scars, came to mind. “If he draws closer to humanity after interacting with them, then that is still an experimental result after a fashion...if in the future he expresses his will to leave off explosives, I won’t be angry. I will make another replacement for him, that’s all.”

“So~, if that happens, and he’s not useful anymore, you won’t be angry if I kill him then, right?”

“Leeza, when you declare that you will kill someone else, you must also be prepared that the other party might kill you.” Huey’s tone was still light.

But Leeza didn’t take to his warning, and pouted. “I’m not gonna lose to someone like that. All I have to do is attack him from behind with my chakrams!”

“It might not be as simple as you think,” Huey smiled. “I wanted a name befitting the formidable strength you all can display when fighting with average humans, and so I chose the name ‘Lamia.’”

Huey stopped as if he had thought of something, and added, “Hm...but I didn’t consider that your enemy might be more than the average human.”

Chapter 3: Striking Off the Mark

(A Chicago bookstore)

Ricardo had finished buying what he needed in a blink of an eye, and he sat back into the Ford that Christopher had been driving.

“Sorry I took so long.”

“Yeah, real long, and I wanted to get out and take a look too – or I mean, I should have gone with you as your bodyguard, right?”

“Yes, but I didn’t want to scare them out of business.”

This was obviously a joke, though Ricardo sat in the back seat with an almost sullen expression and didn’t look like he was joking.

Christopher gave a few exaggerated shakes of his head. “I’m hurt,” he muttered, but he was smiling. “That was really below the belt, Ricardo. I can’t believe you’d say that to a friend.”

“Well, the person who told me not to trust people with the word ‘friends’ constantly hanging on their lips – that was you.”

“True, I meant you shouldn’t trust everything I say, so I said ‘Don’t trust people who say they’re your friends,’” Christopher said, still smiling, and started the car. “So you shouldn’t have believed that one completely either. C’mon, use your head!”

“I did. And I came to a conclusion...you can’t really suspect someone who asks you to be friends the first time they meet you.”

“Hey, that was just to mess with you. Humanity needs to come through discombobulation to reach true strength!”

At this, Ricardo was silent for a while. The car was picking up speed. When it was coasting down the Chicago streets at a steady pace, Ricardo suddenly lifted his head with a more serious expression than usual.

“Hey, Chris, can you just drive around for a bit?”

“...? Okay, sure. What, you want to feel the wind on your face? The why don’t we head to Lincoln Park or Grant Park or something? I think being with nature’s great. Like this car, it represents human manufacturing. Driving it deep into nature would achieve a kind of balance. A human-made being in a human-made object would just be boring.”

“Like Chris yourself?”

“...You can be pretty sharp, you know.”

Christopher hadn’t revealed his nature in the past year with Ricardo, but Ricardo could usually sense a deeper implication in what Christopher said. Sometimes he would pursue what Christopher only half-revealed, like he did now. And Christopher would always answer, “If you open your heart to me, I would happily tell you all my secrets too.”

And Ricardo would usually take a step back, and say, “I’m not sure I trust you enough for that.”

But today, Ricardo answered differently.

“All right.”

“Huh?”

Christopher didn’t expect this reply and looked at Ricardo through the rear view mirror. What he saw was the usual, expressionless Ricardo, but when he looked more closely he could see that Ricardo was looking at his feet and seemed nervous.

“Back then...a lot of things were happening around me. My father and mother had just passed away not long ago...and because I belong to a mafia family, it was pretty hard on me. I faced a lot of betrayal, but at the same time, everyone heaped their own ambitions on me too...”

Christopher didn’t know what made Ricardo suddenly start talking about himself, and through the mirror, he looked at Ricardo in wonder.

All of Ricardo’s actions indicated to Christopher that he had had a pretty turbulent past, but still, when faced with Ricardo’s sudden openness, Christopher didn’t know what to do.

--- Hey hey, wait. Give me a sec.

--- This – this feels a bit weird.

“Wait, stop, stop for a moment. Zip. Pause. Okay, good.”

Ricardo stopped what he was saying, though his deadpan face didn’t change. “...What is it?”

Christopher gave a half smile at this. “What are you doing? Sometimes I really wonder what goes on in that brain of yours. Weird, Ricardo, you’re not acting like yourself. Are you gonna tell me a few stories, then kill me, and then dump me in a bin and dump the bin in the river? And if I resist, oh what then? I don’t think I can kill you.”

“You took care of my grandfather’s thugs pretty thoroughly,” Ricardo said sarcastically. This truth was normally pretty dangerous to put into words; it was like dropping a bomb. Perhaps they were isolated from all other ears inside the car and didn’t worry about anyone listening.

Christopher didn’t look at all upset at what Ricardo said, and his voice was matter-of-fact. “That’s my job. And, um...I dunno how to put this, but I guess I can’t behave the same way towards friends. If I imagine attacking someone to kill, I can’t imagine killing Chi, Leeza, Sickle, the Poet, Rail, Frank, Adele, and Firo...though I’m not sure whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing?”

“...So those are all of Christopher’s friends? That’s it?”

“What, not up to your standards?”

“If they’re your bosom friends, then that’s a pretty good number...but if they’re friends you only chat with, or you just meet at work, then it’s not enough.” Ricardo shook his head as if to emphasize what he said, and sighed. “Well, in terms of how many people I can call my friends...you’re the only one.”

This turn made Christopher chuckle. “What, really? Hey, are you after my virtue or something?”

“Can I hit you?”

Christopher sensed Ricardo bristling and took back what he said. “Kidding – just kidding.”

Then Christopher yawned, turned the steering wheel lightly with his fingers, and looked again at Ricardo’s reflection in the mirror.

“I think I get it...when you said you wanted to go out and buy stuff and wanted me to come along, you actually wanted to avoid people listening in when you tell me your secrets, right?”

Ricardo sighed. “I suppose....Recently, I’ve just felt that...there’s something strange going on in the family.” He looked at his feet again, and his voice sounded a little shaky to Christopher, though Christopher thought he might have been imagining it. “You’ve seen it too, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, kinda.” Although Christopher was new and didn’t participate in any of the family’s criminal activities, he still sensed what Ricardo was speaking of.

If Christopher’s memory served him, the Russo mansion had started becoming active since about two weeks ago. There was a kind of strange buzz among its members.

A few days after that, a strange man in a blue uniform appeared. Christopher and Ricardo didn’t interact with him much, so they didn’t give him much thought.

Meanwhile, a woman named Lua was brought into the Russo mansion and locked up. Ricardo had been assigned the duty of looking after her. Even the dullest of the dull would sense that there was something fishy in all of this.

And it was also around this time when Placido started picking up his momentum. It almost seemed like he wanted to turn his shady life completely around.

“Grandfather’s changed completely...I had been hoping that you could help me tear this all down, but... recently it seems like he’s toned it down all on his own.”

“Aren’t you happy with that? You don’t like this world you’re in, so shouldn’t you be celebrating if it goes poof?” Christopher tried to understand what Ricardo was feeling, but couldn’t help adding a jibe.

“Are you getting back at me for earlier?” Ricardo sighed. His eyes looked sad, which was rare. “But it’s the only world I know...even if it falls, it’s not like I have an ideal world in mind. So...”

Christopher laughed with all his teeth showing. “Haha! Looks like I made a pretty selfish friend, eh?”

Ricardo smiled wryly in response. “And I think that with the way things are going, after everything falls apart, there’s going to be a lot of unfinished business. So I’m not sure why, but I feel like this situation is really suspicious.”

“...Hm, well, if you ask for my objective judgement on this, I think your grandpa’s days as a mafia lord are numbered. I can feel it – or rather, I knew it from the start, and I’m one of the elements that got him on this road...but it’s true, things are getting fishy. It’s like they’ve become some kind of secret cult, or terrorists who really believe they can rule the world.”

Perhaps the truth in Christopher’s words made Ricardo bow his head once more. “To be honest, I was hoping that my grandfather wouldn’t last, and maybe he’d disband the family. And maybe then I could have a normal life.”

“So then, when you make normal friends, would you still need me sticking around?”

“If I made normal friends, I’d be honoured to have you, and I can show you off to other friends as my ‘vampire friend.’”

“So I’d be an exhibition?” Christopher returned, but Ricardo only shook his head quietly. He had a long-suffering expression on his face, as if he felt that the chances of making normal friends would be hopeless.

“But now everything...everything’s come to nothing,” he said coldly, ignoring Christopher’s joke. Then, as if he had just thought of something, he clenched his fists. “...ever since those people in white showed up...and left that liquor, everything’s been going wrong.”

--- Liquor? People in white?

These facts were new to Christopher. He was just about to ask Ricardo when the latter suddenly raised his head and plastered his face to the car window.

“What is it?” Christopher asked, a little lazily, but Ricardo’s reply had a hint of urgency.

“Could you stop the car for a moment?”

“...? okay okay.”

Christopher didn’t know what was happening, but pulled the car to the side of the road. He looked outside, but nothing seemed to be going on in the city. Pedestrians were walking down the street as usual.

“What is it? What did you see?” Christopher thought that there might be a parade going on.

Ricardo wasn’t looking outside, but just straining his ears to listen. His expression was tight.

“I just...I just heard an explosion.”

(An alley in Chicago)

An explosion.

This was the only word to cover what happened at that moment.

As the roaring sound and the flames spread, so did the harsh scent of explosives. The size of the explosion, the flames, and the scorching heat seemed to far exceed the amount of gunpowder that could be packed into an egg-sized container.

When the sound of the explosion ceased to echo in the alley, the air was filled with the screams of people who didn’t know which way to run.

There were hardly any people in the alley, Rail thought. But many people had come to watch. Maybe those two reporters had also come.

But although it was his bomb, there was something unexpected in the result.

“What...? How...?”

The sound of the explosion still ringing in his ears, he turned to Frank. “Hey, Frank, how come my bomb went off so far away?”

They could see the men who were caught in the blast, on their backs and moaning. But no one was wounded. They had just been knocked down.

--- I totally intended that bomb to be fatal.

All of the men had been standing within five metres of the bomb. "If it blew up where it had been, the blast would've taken off a foot or a hand at least," Rail said.

As he said, "where it had been" – the bomb was actually at the other end of the alley, at a distance of more than ten metres.

Now that he thought about it, right before the bomb went off, Rail had seen something flying towards it.

He had set a wide leeway on the timer and set it to go off in exactly one minute. To fill this minute, he had ranted about nothing in particular. But just as the hand in the clock was approaching its final position, Rail had definitely seen something like a silver disk shooting towards the bomb. He didn't have time to see what the thing was before contact. Then, the air was filled with sharp sounds of metal, which dampened the thundering of the bomb, and the bomb had been flung ten metres away.

So in the end, the gang were still alive and unhurt.

"Hoom...um...Rail, look..."

Rail followed Frank's pointing finger and saw the wall. Something was embedded in it, like a metal bar. The bar looked as if it had been driven in the concrete by a giant hammer.

Rail looked more closely and saw that it was a wrench, about the length of a cucumber. The moment he made out what it was, he spun around and jerked his head to look at the end of the alley, where the wrench had come flying from.

And what he saw was another wrench, a giant one, spinning ceaselessly.

Graham had somehow already recovered and gotten up, and was now walking towards Rail and Frank, spinning his giant wrench.

Rail narrowed his eyes. Graham must have been the one who threw the smaller wrench.

"Wow. That's pretty cool, bro. I never thought that my bomb would be deflected like that." Rail began to clap.

Graham heard the sarcasm in his voice, lowered his head, and uttered a sound that was close to a groan. "Ugh..."

Rail thought at first that Graham was moaning in pain because he had been kicked by Frank, but then realized that he was wrong.

"Ugh...Hhh...Hhhhhyyyyahahaha! I'm so happy! Hey, are human lives meant to be this happy? I am the only being who whose life is filled with such joy – God must be watching over me...or no, maybe God doesn't exist! Maybe that's why life is so unfair, and I alone could be so happy! Wait...if that's true, then that means I never relied on God and this joy is all my own doing! Isn't that awesome!"

"H-he's kind of weird," Frank said. The sight of Graham with his face full of mad laughter scared him, and he tried to cower.

But Rail looked at Graham in distaste. He took out several objects. They looked similar to what he had used before, except they had no timepiece attached, and instead had pins like keychain rings.

“You seem pretty cheerful, sure.” Rail was smiling with his lips, but his eyes glared at Graham darkly. Graham, on the other hand, seemed to be wrapped in his own ramblings, and was just happily swinging the giant wrench back and forth.

The rest of the gang were slowly coming to. They got up, saw Graham’s erratic movements, and scampered so that they were farther away. They didn’t want to be caught in the crossfire. Graham had gotten up by himself, so the gang realized that they’d only get in the way. And it wasn’t like Graham gave them any orders.

Or, to be accurate, there was no thought of the gang left in Graham’s mind.

“Ahhh, if I had known such joy could exist in the world! It is clear that our negotiations have closed. They want me to bring you in alive, and yet the two of you – no, wait...you – you’re called Rail, right – you’ve already made up your mind to kill me, right?”

Rail narrowed his eyes at Graham’s antics and his nonstop babble. “Hm...yeah, pretty much, haha.” He expertly picked a grenade with the thumb and first two fingers of one hand, and pulled the pin off with his other hand.

“Frank, let’s go.”

“Oh, uh-huh.”

Before Frank had even finished answering, Rail had tossed three little eggs between him and Graham.

The moment they touched the ground, they all exploded in huge amounts of what seemed to be red and black ---

By the time everyone’s minds registered the bang that followed, the flames from the blast had already shot high into the air and rolled outwards like a hot tsunami.

Meanwhile, Frank’s body seemed to become one large cannon ball, and he dived towards the centre of the explosion. The giant toddler looked as if he was a fireman rushing into the flames to save a child, as if the roaring fire wasn’t even there.

His aim was to cut through the fire and smoke, which would have his opponent’s hands full, and attack him while he was not prepared. This was the joint tactic that he and Rail often used in such situations.

Because Frank was so fast, he blew a clear tunnel through the smoke and fire. Rail peered through it, hoping to see Graham’s shocked face.

But what he saw was that beside the large smoke tunnel made by Frank was another smaller one, which was already closing.

--- Huh?

Before he could figure out what it was, he heard a cheerful voice ringing in his ears.

“Hi.”

“Wh...”

Rail whipped his head around. Graham was almost standing nose-to nose with him, with a self-satisfied expression and a victorious smile on his face, like he was an animal who had just caught his prey.

“How did...”

“And you thought only the big one knows tricks like diving into smoke? Flames don’t belong to you alone...though whose is it then? Hey, if it’s not me either, what should I do? What is the best course of responsible action in this case? If I kill you, would I die too?”

As Graham reeled this off, his uniform was smoking. It had been scorched and was streaked black. The smell was overpowering.

Seeing Frank coming straight towards him might have given him the same idea, but he shouldn’t have been able to move at the same time as Frank, Rail thought, his lips twisting bitterly. Especially after being caught in an explosion. And so, he must have managed to think of this plan beforehand.

Rail shook his head. “You...you must be crazy.”

Graham seemed to have taken this as a compliment. “Totally correct. Absolutely addled. You’re right, I’m insane, and that’s probably why I can be so cheerful, right? I can take a hopeless situation and turn it around, comprehend it as the way it has to be comprehended. And depending on what goes wrong in my head, I can even process sadness as a kind of joy! Perhaps this means that there are no limits for and all of the world’s joy centres on me!”

He laughed, and added in a quiet voice, “Isn’t this actually a blessing?”

Meanwhile, Frank, who had shot clear of the flames, found that Graham wasn’t there.

“Um...huh?”

He turned and looked back. What he saw was the dispersing flames and black smoke, and through it all, Graham approaching Rail slowly.

“R-Rail---!”

Frank hurriedly rotated himself and then shot back towards Rail with the same force he had come. As he pushed off the ground, there was a sound like thunder, air currents spiralled from his feet, and the dust and debris which had been blown into the air by Rail’s bombs were caught flying wildly in the whirlwind.

As Frank got close to Graham, he raised a massive fist, intending to slam it down on Graham’s head. But he paused.

“Ugh...” Rail made a very small choking sound.

The head of Graham’s wrench had been dialed to its widest point, and it fit perfectly around Rail’s neck.

Graham waved the wrench as if he was waving insects he had caught in a net, and swung Rail a half circle so that Rail was between himself and Frank.

“R-Rail...!”

Frank’s subconscious was working furiously. He reached out a hand to swipe Rail from Graham’s hold, but Graham jerked the wrench upwards and Frank’s fingers only closed on air.

“Hack...Hhh....ugh...”

Graham heard pained noises from Rail's throat and jumped a step back. "You should express gratitude for camaraderie! Isn't friendship great! Friendship is a wonderful thing...sincere friends are always the balm for my sore heart!"

His words seemed totally irrelevant, but he did lower the wrench and let Rail's feet touch the ground, and pulled the wrench free from his neck.

"Gah...oh... ...?"

Rail was free, but he stared at Graham, trying to figure out whether Graham was going to make another move. Graham looked right back without enmity, and just started to spin his wrench casually as if he hadn't been choking Rail to death a moment ago. "Yeah, I was thinking, you might yell something like, 'Leave me and go' kind of thing, so I went for your throat. So, I think I won this round. So what do you say to calling it quits?"

"...What?"

"Hey, think about it, I was ordered to bring you in alive, and that could be the first step to abolishing violence. We could be the first step to world peace, and our names would echo through posterity. Actually, it doesn't matter if we aren't remembered by posterity! As long as we recognize our contribution to the world...isn't that enough for us to hope for a future time when we can meet again with our heads held high, and smiling? Shall we give this possibility a chance?"

"...You're all bullshit." Rail's lips were parted in a smile, but there was the fire of anger in his eyes. He seemed to think that Graham was ridiculing him, and took several egg-shaped bombs from his coat.

Graham did nothing to stop him, just smiled and shook his head. "I can tell you with certainty –"

Before he finished his sentence, Rail saw that Graham's arm seemed to have disappeared.

---!

As he was still dazed by the mental snapshot of a Graham with no arm, he felt a rush of coldness on one side of his face.

The wrench had come out of nowhere and was now lightly tapping his cheek.

--- He's so fast...!

Rail sucked in a breath in spite of himself, and Frank, who was standing behind him, was so alarmed by this that his eyes seemed to go out of focus.

Graham saw the fear in their eyes and clicked his tongue.

"It's impossible to win against me, especially with just with the two of you."

--- Impossible?

Defeat.

Rail thought of this word and felt a chill run over his skin.

Should he give up and go with Graham quietly?

But if he did, how would they escape later? If there were more men waiting for them, as strong as Graham, what could he do then? And if someone like Graham was guarding them, would they really get a chance to escape or cause some damage while they were there?

Would it be best to pretend to go quietly and wait for the opportune moment? Was it really?

Ideas chased each other through Rail's head, each trailing a question mark.

Their original plan should have gone smoothly.

But Rail had not considered the most important thing, which was that he had never thought that he could be beaten by those who were after him.

Rail ground his teeth and prepared to make a run for it.

“Oh my oh my...Rail, this is so pathetic~.”

Graham heard a girlish voice and immediately paused. Rail and Frank's eyes widened and they swept their gaze all around, but there was not a single girl or woman in sight. The civilians who had come to see what was going on were all far away at the mouth of the alley.

But this was the indication that Rail needed, and he realized who it was.

“Leeza!”

“You bragged a whole lot earlier, but see, it's all come to nothing!”

“...Shut up!”

“What? Where's all the big talk now, huh? Where's the fake smile you always have to hide how ugly you are? You never really smile, Rail, 'cuz you're always have that glare in your eyes. Hypocrites like you make me want to puke. Or maybe you're actually a masochist – how many lines do you want on your face?”

Leeza's barrage of insults made Rail grind his teeth in anger, but he couldn't say a word.

“I have no idea who you are –” This wasn't Rail, but rather Graham, who was still looking for a female figure all around. “But you were just talking about the scars on his face, right? It won't do to be extra polite and step around the issue, but your words all sounded like you intended to ridicule him. Or...or maybe it's that I'm too negative, and I can't interpret it in any other way...? But truth is relative, so that must be the correct interpretation if I don't want to interpret what you said in any other way, so it's the correct answer for me, right? Dammit, I got it...where's my prize then...ah, the true prize rests in my warm and beating heart! Isn't that right? My heart is priceless! That's right, priceless! Come on, you have to at least try to keep up with me!”

Normally, Shaft would have shot several sardonic comments at Graham at this point, but he was far away and didn't hear Leeza's voice. He sighed. “He's finally lost it...he's talking to someone who isn't there...”

The situation seemed to be derailing, and Leeza's angry voice echoed in the alley. “Hey hey hey, I don't get it...how come you're on his side? You were just chattering on like a monkey, and suddenly you're goody two-shoes? Doesn't that make you a hypocrite too?”

Graham just bounced the wrench up and down on his shoulder, and spoke at the same rhythm. “No, I'm not a good guy – I'm a bad guy through and through. When I was working in the factory, we got divided into

separate groups for Whites and Blacks, and then the foreman told us, 'I can get any number of Blacks to replace you lot.' But afterwards, I mentioned this to one of the Black workers who became my friend, and learned that the bastard foreman tried to rile them up with the same thing – 'I can get any number of Whites to replace you.' And I have no real objections to doing things this way, so that makes me a bad guy. But, anyway...haven't you realized? Everything you've been saying tells me that you're a loser."

"...?"

"Everything you said pretty much meant, 'I got nothing over Rail except to laugh at his scars. That's the only thing that gives me a sense of superiority, but it's a false one at that. I'm a lapdog who can't be the master's favourite, so I have to hide my insecurity by making fun of other people. So please have pity on me, master.' How's that then? Aren't I right? As straightforward as they come! An M – you're actually an M, right?"

"What...!" In response to Graham's wild guesswork, Leeza's voice shook.

"So, Miss Heard-but-not-seen, I'm hit the nail on the head, haven't I? But I hate dogs, so you can go to hell. Death or die. Or, to put it simply, death and peace...that's right! Death and peace!"

"...Total nonsense...good luck getting girls."

Leeza's voice seemed to have gotten deeper. Frank, who had a higher vantage point, saw a silver chakram fly towards Graham from behind.

"Uh..."

Graham saw that Frank's gaze and expression had changed, and quickly spun a hundred and eighty degrees.

One disc was just about to make contact –

DING. With a sound like a bell ringing, Graham's wrench drew a wide circle in midair and deflected the chakram.

"Fun fun...you make me happy, girl. You're actually adding to your loser points! You pretty much just told me, 'I can't win against him unless I use stealth'! and then this stealthy underhand tactic failed! Isn't that funny? But too bad, this only ranks 798 on my personal Top Entertainment Board of the year...well, in other words, it's not really that funny. Since I'm bored, you can get packing."

The chakram fell, caught on Graham's wrench.

It looked almost like an angel's halo, except there was a sharp edge all around. If it had reached Graham, he would have been fatally wounded.

It was inconceivable how Graham could still be casually chattering away, though Leeza's voice was tight and serious. "...How did you see that coming?"

"I see all. That's one of my little tricks."

Of course Graham was lying to Leeza. He guessed the attack from Frank's expression, but since it worked, he wanted to rub it in a little. But after a few seconds, he also started to believe what he had said.

He kept an eye on Rail and Frank, but also checked out all his blind spots. He wanted to be able to determine where Leeza was the next time a chakram flew at him.

As he focused on each part of the scene, he continued. "All right then, what are you going to do now? How about coming quietly with me too? Or are you going to leave them to die and run away with your tail between your legs?"

"..." Leeza seemed to be thinking, but then her sharp voice rang out. "I was just about to say that, you retard."

"...?" Leeza's spirits seemed to have returned, and Graham frowned.

-- What's changed?

Although Graham looked excitable on the surface, he was actually quite calm on the inside. He quietly surveyed the scene before him.

And saw two new shadows coming towards him.

One of the shadows that left the crowd was a sketchy-looking Asian man, and he was accompanied by a classy woman in an evening dress.

The crowd of civilians saw these two strange characters appear and started to think that maybe all this was some advertisement for a circus. Graham whistled in delight, and Rail and Frank's expressions lifted.

"Chi! Sickle!"

At Rail's yell, Graham paused. He took a wanted poster from his breast pocket, and began laughing to himself. "Chi...Hong Chi Mei, and Sickle...the woman who knows capoeira, right? Well, you look totally different from those two reporters! I'm glad that we worked out who you really are!"

The two new arrivals were shouldering past Graham's gang, and came to stand beside Rail and Frank. Graham's gang didn't try to stop them, and only continued watching from afar.

Rail looked as if he had more colour in his face now. "How did you know we were here?"

"The series of blasts from your bombs," Sickle said matter-of-factly. "They've alerted everyone in the area. The police are going to get here soon, so we need to wrap things up quick."

Then she turned to look at Graham. "So this guy's our opponent?"

Her voice was filled with hostility, which was startling considering her appearance. But there was a deep, dark glint in her eyes, which matched her tone of voice perfectly.

Graham looked even more excited. All sorts of random things could come out of his mouth at a time like this, but his next words were really quite unexpected.

"So then, you're the woman who knows capoeira, right? I already know about you. But, why is it that you're dressed in such feminine attire on one hand but talk in such a masculine way? Oh, I am really getting excited...maybe I'm in love. If I'm really in love with you, what do you say? Do you accept my love or not? Perhaps this is what love is – spiritual arousal, nerves all in a buzz, feeling confused?"

It looked like Graham didn't intend to answer Sickle's question at all, just reel off on his own tangent.

"...The way you talk annoys me...not quite how the Poet is annoying, but still annoying." Sickle's eyebrows, which already showed her displeasure, knitted closer together. "Let's make things clear, mister, lest you misunderstand."

“What? What do you mean? Are you going to do something – to me – that could easily lead to misunderstanding? Damn, what should I do if you want a kiss? What should I do? But wait, you said it’s a misunderstanding, so you mean that you don’t actually have any feelings towards me, right? So this means I’m being rejected, right? Oh no, I have just made contact with a previously unknown aspect of human experience...to be dumped even before I confess my love!...or no, it would be more accurate to say that I was dumped even before I fell in love...don’t you think that’s a super rare experience?”

“Oh, go to hell...what I meant about misunderstanding was that...you said I know capoeira, but capoeira is supposed to be a martial kind of dance, and it’s supposed to be entertainment and make people happy...”

As Sickle spoke, she stepped forward and leaned her face closer to Graham. The distance between them made breathing difficult, and Sickle did indeed look like she was about to go for a kiss, except she had an ugly expression on her face that spoke to her true intentions.

“But the capoeira I do intends to bring destruction.” As she spoke, she prepared for an attack. “In another words, it’s a completely different branch of the art.”

“Huh...?”

In the next moment, Graham thought that Sickle had fallen, because her bright, beautiful eyes had disappeared from his vision.

But what came instead was a rush of air and a shadow, heading straight towards the left side of his face.

---Shit.

Graham’s body had already begun to move. He flung himself backwards, his spine arching.

In that split second, Sickle’s foot passed through the place his head had been.

Graham felt a strong wind whipping his hair, and heard Sickle’s voice ringing in his ears.

“So, don’t call what I do ‘capoeira.’”

Graham’s eyes had squinted in reflex, but he had a vague impression that Sickle was still close above him, and lowered himself even further.

“It would be an insult to capoeira.”

--- I don’t get it. It you’re the one using a twisted version of capoeira, the person who is really insulting it is you, right?

Graham wanted to say this, but Sickle’s foot was still close to his face, and he couldn’t. And it wasn’t just Sickle he was facing. He wanted to learn more about Sickle’s attacks and move farther away, but Chi had materialized beside him and expertly locked his arm.

Chi’s two hands were bound with a thick layer of bandages, but somehow he still managed to grab Graham. His grip was effortless and unbreakable.

“Wh...?”

“This ends now.”

Chi turned and twisted mercilessly.

A cracking noise resounded before Graham could even think to retaliate. It seemed that Graham's left shoulder was broken, and pain washed through him.

"Ugh...Oh..."

Graham swung the wrench high in his right hand, and as Chi jumped back, he did as well. Meanwhile, Sickle had turned a circle in midair and now stood in her previous stance.

Chi massaged his bandaged hands. "I was going to use the blades, but I have some questions for you. If you don't cooperate, you can expect to have all four limbs dislocated."

Graham was only clutching his own arm and uttering quiet groans of pain, and didn't seem to have heard what Chi said.

Sickle looked disappointed. "What a weakling. Though I have to say, he might beat the Poet in a yapping contest."

"Ouch...argh..."

Chi's threats and Sickle's taunts made Graham recall a certain incident.

It happened when Graham was still a child, and even then he loved to take things apart.

One day, he received a harsh scolding from his parents: "You don't know how things feel when they are being taken apart!" It was a similar philosophy to Eastern thinkers or Native American traditions, that all things have souls.

--- That's true. Mommy and Daddy are right.

--- What does it feel like to be taken apart?

--- I must find out!

He wasn't even ten years old yet, and thought hard about how he could accomplish this.

Graham had forgotten the details. He only remembered pain, hopelessness, and a sense of paralyzing loneliness.

His mother had heard moans coming from his room and rushed there to find that all of his joints had been dislocated. Every bone in his left hand had been popped out of their sockets, and the flesh was swollen, making his hand look like a blown-up glove.

Graham recalled this scene and tightened his grip on his wrench.

--- I was thinking then, it's all right now, isn't it?

--- I knew then that I was a being that could be taken apart too, and this brought me a kind of peace.

--- I knew what it felt like to be taken apart, so that means I can continue taking things apart --- that's what I was thinking then.

For a long time, Graham couldn't figure out why he had these strange thoughts as a child, how he could hurt himself without reservation, and why he wanted to continue dismantling things – but now he knew.

All things broke, or died, or rotted away in the end. This was the harsh reality that he found hard to accept as a child. He wanted to fight against this process, understood that all things must end, and so he actively pursued it, to realize it.

There were numerous reasons, and all of them combined lead to his current quirks.

“I was so stupid.”

Graham raised his wrench. The pain in his shoulder made him feel something akin to nostalgia.

At the end of his youth, when he was finally growing out of his confusion, he met a man named Ladd. He felt that he and Ladd were alike in a way, and cheerfully swore loyalty to him.

The image of Ladd in prison swam in Graham's mind. “Well...it looks like I lost to myself,” he muttered quietly.

“What?” Chi noticed that Graham had stopped moaning, and started to watch Graham's every move.

“I was too arrogant. Maybe I was getting delusions of invincibility. This won't do – it won't do at all. Boss Ladd would kill me.”

“What did you say? Are you asking to be spared?”

Graham didn't answer Chi, but just turned his wrench slowly and bent it towards himself, and closed it on his left arm.

“Okay...got it!”

Crunch.

The sound was slightly lower than when his arm had been dislocated. Movement was restored.

“How did...?”

Certain martial arts masters have been known to pop their joints back in by themselves, but Graham's method was completely different. He seemed to think of his joint as a machine part, and had twisted it back into place with a simple turn of his wrench.

The blood vessels and tendons, which had been pulled to their limit, ought to have been in agony. But Graham's expression didn't show any of this. He was smiling brightly, and once again rested the wrench on his shoulder. Like before, his eyes shone.

“I got it. People who choose not to kill others or to leave ones alive...these are people who are confident that they would never be killed. That's right.”

Smack! Smack!

Graham tossed the wrench back and forth between his left and right hands, his movements getting faster and faster.

“But then I could be killed by Ladd.”

Smack. Smack. Smack. Smack.

“So...The ones I will leave alive are Rail and Frank, and I won’t bother with the rest of you.”

Smack. Smack. Smack. Smack. Smack smack smack smack.

“The way I fight came straight from Boss Ladd...and ‘taking it easy’ isn’t in his vocabulary.”

Smack smack smack smack smack smack smack smack smack smack.

“You all think you’re invincible, don’t you?”

“What...what are you talking about?”

Smack. Smack. Smack. Smack. Smack. Smack. Smack.

The speed at which the wrench was going from one hand to the other was unbelievable, and Sickle and Chi both drew in a breath. Rail and Frank had decided not to join in the fray this time, and watched events unfold from the sidelines.

“Whether it’s your team spirit, or your pride, or your spine –”

Smack smack smack smack smack smack smack smack ---

Graham seemed to be reaching the peak of insanity, and the difference between joy and sorrow no longer had any meaning. His expression contained neither one. The only thing that filled him now was a limitless, mad excitement.

He shook his head. He had only one thing to say to Chi and Sickle, very short and to the point.

“—I’m going to take it all apart!”

(A few minutes later)

For the crowd of onlookers, time seemed to drag, and it was even slower for the situation to develop towards its next step.

The police department had gotten wind of the disturbance and had sent officers to the scene. But by the time they arrived, the only people left were the civilian onlookers, and the perpetrators were nowhere to be seen.

The ground was dented, as if they had been blown up, and the charred, cracked cement was still sending up clouds of smoke.

When the police heard what was going on, they immediately recalled the murder case from three years ago.

A Russo capo called Sedley, along with his underlings, had been found dead, their bodies charred and blackened by bombs.

But when questioned, the Russo family answered, “What gang war? What the hell are you talking about? We ain’t no mafia – that’s just your imagination, all right?” They had never admitted to being involved, so the police couldn’t figure out who was being targeted. The case was shelved without being solved.

But this time it was different, because there were numerous witnesses.

The officers thought that at least this time they could get some reliable leads about what happened, but –

The statements from the witnesses just didn't add up.

“A giant toddler, and a child with tons of scars – they were messing around.”

“Martians, it's a Martian invasion!”

“A pink elephant exploded!”

“It was one weirdo after another...and a guy in blue uniformed mowed them all down.”

“I tell you, it was the best show ever!”

“A woman, she was like three metres tall, she changed into a bathing suit and totally wreaked havoc.”

“I saw a weird woolly mammoth lumbering around, but the guy riding the mammoth...I don't know where he went.”

“There were eggs exploding! I was scared out of my wits! I'm ever gonna eat eggs ever again!”

“There was a giant fork, wider as it got to the tips, right, and I nearly got jabbed in the eye!”

“After he popped his shoulder back in, the one in uniform got really violent. I dunno how to put it, but you know Ladd, right? Ladd's famous around these parts, and this guy was pretty close.”

“Ten men in black shot bullets into the air, and said something like they were going to ‘conduct new research on explosives,’ and yeah, you know those explosives? Scary, man.”

“Officer, Sir, the perp has white hair, and half his ear's ripped – hurry up and catch him!”

“He was wearing yellow! Wearing yellowooooow!”

“Everyone ran, willy-nilly, just before you arrived.”

The statements were all over the place. The only consistent descriptions were a man in a blue work uniform, a toddler over two metres tall, and an Asian man with hands like a mummy. But none of it seemed credible.

The officers took down these notes nevertheless, and started to report them back and cross-examined the witnesses.

And in the end, this incident was recorded as flammable industrial materials being transported, and igniting in an accident en route.

Of course, many newspapers expressed their suspicions that this wasn't really the case. However, events of a greater magnitude occurred soon afterwards, so this incident didn't receive much attention from the press.

But this was the foreshadowing of what was to come.

In the alley, undisclosed aspects of the events continued to take their course.

A man was watching the police activity from afar. The rim of his hat covered his eyes, but he lifted his head and spoke to the sky.

“Oh god, oh man, what anguish. Is it possible to exist in this desperate, sinful world, with evil creeping through our pores and we, utterly consumed? Oh, how I lament. When the inevitable foreboding possessed me and bares its fangs – what shall I witness then? The world in its widening gyre, human sin, exist in totum under my skin. When all flesh dissipates, what shall I witness? What shall I witness? Must I endure the devouring of my heart?”

He was leaning against the wall of a building and spoke as if rehearsing for the theatre. But suddenly, a man and a woman, who had been standing next to him, both sighed.

“That’s enough, Master Poet. You’re the only one who hasn’t exposed himself – so what do you think you’re doing, attracting attention like this?”

“Really, I knew from the beginning that you’d be pretty useless, but you could at least try to show up. Where were you anyway?”

The Poet only shook his head at this. “...The zenith of this world, the most vulnerable, but simultaneously the most potent, is the thread that joins human beings to one another. Id est, it is love,” he said with a grievous tone, as if evoking something from the distant past. “When one rubs his eyes in wonder and gazes upon the multitudinous colours of this world, the second when the same ideas resonate between two individuals, their cores harmonize. Love, it is love. It is a yellow-green tendril, the incorporeal link that tugs at another soul. An insignificant existence such as mine merits it not, and I have never savoured it. All the same, I am a pilgrim seeking love...”

This string of random words made the other two speak up once more.

“So, basically, you couldn’t even get past the crowd of onlookers, right?”

But this time it wasn’t the same man as before.

It was a man wearing a suit, who looked like he was taking his normal route through the streets. The first man had already disappeared into the other end of the road.

Following this, a little girl walked by the Poet, and there was an almost witchy smile on her face. “Sham, you’re amazing. You can actually translate what the Poet said.”

“You should have gotten used to it by now, Hilton.” This came from a police officer who had come to investigate.

Next, the old lady who had been talking to the officer answered. “Don’t think I ever could. He’s a total freak.”

Words poured from a huge variety of people, who all invariably went back to what they were doing once they had finished speaking. As if they had all been possessed, in the short term, by spirits.

The Poet sighed and left the crowded alley without another word.

It was rare that the Poet was silent, but he soon reached another alley, which was empty.

He first made sure that there were no other people within earshot, and then spoke, his words plain for once. "But then again... who would have thought that there'd be so many of the Twins here in Chicago? It looks like Master Huey is really planning to run his experiments here, and in New York too..."

It was as if his own words helped him validate that he wasn't actually dreaming.

He tried to find a way of summarizing their present situation, and said, "Maybe all of us are Alice, who has stumbled accidentally into imprisonment."

(An alley in Chicago)

--- No! It went totally wrong!

Rail had taken his hat and scarf from his bag, and used it to cover his face while he went through Chicago's streets and alleyways.

--- Well, I never really did plan it properly...

He was still wearing the silvery coat and felt that he attracted too much attention on the streets, and so he picked smaller alleys, where he trotted in silence. The events that just happened turned incessantly in his mind, and all he could do was to scream silently in his heart.

--- I can't believe it! He even defeated Sickle and Chi – together!

After Graham finished ranting, popped his shoulder back in, and declared that he was going to destroy everything, his movements changed.

He was faster than Chi, more unpredictable than Sickle, and more destructive than Frank.

Sickle attacked him with a kick as before, but he "dismantled" it, just as he said he would.

He didn't retreat, but rather attacked, sliding smoothly into the range of the kick. A moment later, he had slammed the rapidly turning wrench to Sickle's foot. He blocked her kick as if they had been fencing.

There was a horrible sound, and Sickle flew backwards, jumping away from Graham on one leg.

Rail didn't know what happened, and looked at Sickle. The leg that she had been using to kick Graham was bent out of shape, with the muscles twisted into a strange knot.

Then Sickle and Chi attacked together. But their series of attacks were all blocked by Graham, and at the same time, Graham dislocated one wrist from each attacker. Rail couldn't see what was happening because his eyes couldn't keep up with the dancing wrench. All he knew was that every time one of Sickle's or Chi's limbs made contact, they would immediately retreat, their joints dislocated.

Chi grunted and pushed his own hand violently, snapping the bones back into their sockets. Rail thought that his movement looked a lot more natural than when Graham had used the wrench on himself.

Rail was going to use his explosives to help them, but slowly realized that the fight had escalated to a point where he couldn't be of any help.

And he also realized:

--- He...he was going easy on us before...

It was obvious, now that he thought about it. He felt a sense of chagrin creep over him. The scars on his face twisted because of how hard he was clenching his teeth.

Just when Rail had sunk to the bottom of his own shame, he saw, through the crowd, that the police cars were approaching.

“...! Frank! Take Rail and run!

“What? Um, uh....”

Frank followed Rail’s gaze and also saw the police coming closer and closer.

Rail grabbed several blue eggs from his coat, and yanked the pins off all of them at once.

“Let’s scatter, and we’ll all meet up at the rendezvous...!”

“Huh? Oh, okay, got it!”

Before Frank had even finished, Rail had already threw the eggs into the air.

The eggs made slight cracking noises, and then blew apart.

The alley was enveloped in thick smoke.

--- Dammit...Where the heck did that guy come from anyway!

In the end, Rail could only run away. He was boiling with hatred for Graham, but he also felt a sense of fear.

This was the first time that Lamia, acting together, had lost so disastrously.

What were they supposed to do from now on?

The first thought that came to Rail’s mind was that they should wait for Huey’s orders, but then he hurriedly pushed this thought away.

--- Who wants to listen to him anyway! We...we couldn’t do anything else, so we decided to accept the mission out of the kindness of our hearts! If we help him do these things he can’t do himself, it’s only because he begged us to!

Rail shook his head violently, trying to patch up his dignity.

We’ll figure out what to do about that mechanic after we meet back at the rendezvous point. It would probably be the Poet, Chi, Sickle, and that despicable Leeza doing all the talking then, and Rail couldn’t imagine himself quietly going along with them.

He was the one who came up with the plan to act as bait, and dragged Frank into it.

And it ended with all of them running away with their tails between their legs.

Rail’s heart quivered with this realization, and he was swamped by a huge sense of guilt. On top of that, Sickle and Chi were hurt because of him too.

--- Whatever the case, escaping is the most important thing now...

--- I'll apologize to Sickle and Chi later. And as for Leeza, you can eat my bombs!

As these thoughts went through Rail's mind, he was also looking left and right for a good place to change out of his coat. But he sensed that something was wrong, and turned away from his thoughts to look around.

There usually weren't many people in the alleys, but this seemed too quiet.

Somehow, he was all alone, and in front of him, there was a row of silhouettes blocking his way. He almost froze.

--- More enemies?

Were they also with that Graham person?

As he looked closely at the figures in front of him, Rail reached into his coat.

--- Scientists?

Rail was hit by the memory of scientists surrounding him, and shuddered.

The people who blocked his way were a strange group who all wore white lab coats.

--- Are they sent by Huey? So they think I'm already useless and they want to "process" me?

Then he saw that there was a delivery van behind the silhouettes, so that the people on the street at the other end of the alley couldn't see the figures in the lab coats.

He hurriedly twisted his neck to look behind him. There was no vehicle there, but there was also a team of men in lab coats, standing poker-straight in the middle of the alley, watching him.

--- I'm surrounded?

Rail felt cold sweat run down his back, and he began feverishly calculating whether he had enough bombs left.

---...Have I got enough...? Have I...? I do!

Normally he would have cheerfully pulled the pins right away, but the fight with Graham left a seed of terror in his heart, and he felt suddenly nervous.

It seemed like the researchers wanted him to feel at ease, because a woman stepped out from their ranks and asked politely, "Um, if you please, are you Rail?"

"...?"

The way she spoke seemed totally incongruous with the situation he was in, and Rail paused. But she already knew his name, and it wasn't like he could deny it – his scars gave him away.

So Rail nodded, and decided he might as well try to find out who they all were. "...That's right."

The woman clapped her hands together and smiled. Her cheerful voice echoed through the alley. "Oooh, I've finally managed to find you. You almost never go anywhere on your own, so I thought, isn't this an opportunity, and rushed here real quick. But then the person who was on surveillance said that they'd lost you, so I was like really nervous for a bit, but now I'm okay! Yep, um, I'd like you to come with me..."

“...Why? Who are you anyway, Lady?”

The bespectacled woman looked warm and inviting, but Rail’s mind – or rather, his entire body, was on alert. There was something sinister about her.

But then she answered. “Oh, me? I’m called Renée. I’m the leader of Unit Six in Nebula’s Pharmaceutical Department.”

Before she finished, Rail had already figured out why she rubbed him the wrong way.

“I need your help with lots of things...let me think. Right, first of all, I want to see those awesome bombs you carry with you. I’ve read the reports, and they’re not like normal explosives, right?”

Warning bells.

“And also, maybe I can use you as bait for the others.”

Warning bells.

“Oh, oh, right! And the most important thing is – ”

The warning bells that were ringing in Rail’s head far exceeded their magnitude when he was facing Graham.

--- I get it. This lady...

--- She and Huey...they’re the same.

Rail felt nausea and chills overtake him.

The woman kept on chattering cheerily on. Her voice was clear and innocent, and from this alone, there was nothing evil about her; but behind her innocent chatter were her cruel words.

“I need to know what shenanigans Mr. Huey did with your body, so I need to dissect you for a sec. Dismember you just a teensy little bit, okay?”

--- I thought so – she’s the same as Huey...!

--- They both see me as a guinea pig, and that’s all!

“...I just heard another explosion.”

“Huh? For real?”

Ricardo’s words made Christopher look all around them. He had lowered the car window and stopped the car, but the noises from the people on the street deafened Christopher to the sounds of any explosions.

At first, he had driven in the direction that Ricardo had heard the explosion from, but he found a barrier made by police cars. He knew something was going on, but they couldn’t get any closer.

He suggested that they get out and walk.

“But it would cause a lot of trouble if Chris gets taken in for questioning.”

Christopher accepted Ricardo’s line of reasoning in the end, and they left without another word.

But Ricardo said he heard more explosions, so Christopher had rolled down the window to let all the sounds of the city filter into the car.

As Ricardo’s bodyguard, Christopher should try to distance him from any danger, but the explosions from the city had aroused his curiosity, and he decided to follow Ricardo’s ears.

And soon after, Ricardo heard more explosions.

“How come I can’t hear anything? Is it because you’re more sensitive to this kind of thing after your parents were blown up?” Christopher said, totally disregarding how Ricardo might feel.

But Ricardo didn’t seem to mind, and even agreed. “Maybe so. When my parents were killed, I heard it...and I kept on hearing it in my dreams for a long time, over and over, and sometimes I would even think I was hearing it after I woke up.”

“So, you think you might have been hallucinating just now?”

“It would be nice if I was, but I think it was from over there...” Ricardo turned his head slowly and stopped when he was facing the direction of the blast.

“All right, but say we got to the site of the explosion, then what? Maybe it’s just a car accident, or maybe we’d be in danger and get killed, right?”

Christopher said this in a joking tone and Ricardo didn’t pay him any attention. Ricardo was still looking out the window. Christopher could only sigh and give a wry smile, but his heart was beating faster, and he actually really wanted to see some action.

“If it’s a serial bomber or something, it would be pretty fun to stop him together, right? Maybe it’ll finally destroy the life you hate so much. Haha! All right, then, let’s sing a song to this bomber, shall we? Like ‘Bomb the bridge and it’s falling down,’ how’s that...?”

Christopher seemed to be wholeheartedly set on composing lyrics and started gurgling a tune in his throat, but Ricardo still paid him no heed. He suddenly lunged forwards into the front of the car, and pointed ahead.

“Over there.”

He was pointing at the mouth of an alley, from which smoke was rolling.

“Oh wow!” Christopher whistled in response and stepped hard on the gas.

There were many kind passers-by who had gathered to help, and from the amount of smoke, it was likely someone had already alerted the police and the fire department.

Christopher thought that it would be hard to stay there for long, so as he got closer, he stepped on the break instead. The car slowed.

The smoke was thicker than he had expected, and Christopher couldn’t see what was happening from the driver’s seat. But then, more blasts ripped the air, and even Christopher could hear them now. The blasts made the onlookers scatter like birds, and the mouth of the alley emptied.

Everyone was gone now, and they could see the mouth of the alley, but the smoke was still too thick.

“So, what’s the plan? We can get out and take a look if you like.”

“How do you expect me to make up my mind...”

Christopher was jittery, and he tapped the steering wheel in a quick rhythm. Ricardo, though, seemed a bit hesitant, and only looked one way and then another.

“...! Chris!”

“? What?”

“Look! Over there...! A child...!”

Ricardo was pointing out the window, and Christopher peered into the mouth of the alley, which was still filled with smoke. There he saw the small figure, lying prone on the ground, as if all the smoke had crushed him.

He still seemed conscious, and was trying to crawl out of the alley. But after a moment, he stopped. The only movement they saw was the light bouncing off his silvery clothing.

“We need to help him...” Ricardo jumped from the car and ran towards the alley.

Christopher stayed in the car a moment longer to spit out one more sarcastic comment. “Gee, traumatized people really move fast, don’t they.” Then he also jumped out of the car and headed in the direction Ricardo was going,

“Hm?”

Halfway, though, Christopher saw the silver coat, and his heart skipped a beat.

“Bombs...”

Things were coming together in his mind, accompanied by a ringing in the background. Then he got closer and saw black lines on the child’s exposed neck, and the answer hit him.

Christopher’s feet started running by themselves, and he pushed all thoughts out of his mind.

He ran towards the figure and cradled him in his arms. An incredulous look crossed his face.

“...Rail?”

Chapter 4: The Outskirts of Town

(Evening, Russo Mansion)

“Yeah...? So, a vice-president and an intern from some New York news agency? How’re you connected with those two freaks, exactly?”

Placido’s deep voice boomed through the room.

There were antiques placed along the walls of this room, though being decorative wasn’t their function, and appraising them as tacky or elegant didn’t make sense. They simply sat there, a symbol of their owner’s power.

Even if you didn’t have a guilty conscience, being in the vortex of such riches and worldly ambitions would be enough to generate a sense of inferiority.

But the man whom Placido was facing now didn’t look scared in the slightest. He just answered, peacefully, “Well...in fact, we became just acquainted today. However, it looks like this answer is not to your liking.”

As he glanced at Carol, Gustav St. Germain’s monocle flashed once in the light.

Carol was trembling from head to foot. She looked as if she’d spill any and all without even being asked, even what her parents said while they were dreaming.

She had not packed her camera, and it sat on a table. Beside the table stood the man who had dragged them here, the man with a scar across his face.

The vice-president surveyed all of this calmly. “All you have to do is to contact the parent company in New York to ascertain my identity,” he said, his voice showing that he wasn’t at all cowed by the atmosphere in the room. “And if you require information on the two individuals who shared lunch with us today, then I will tell you that as information brokers, this information can be divulged when you arrange an official meeting for that purpose.”

“Information brokers? You are information brokers, you say?” This term seemed like it came straight out of a film, and Placido smiled with derision. “Hear that, Klik? This is the first time this year that I’ve heard someone call himself that.”

“That’s probably ‘cuz he’s addled with fear, Boss.” The scarred man, addressed by Placido as Klik, also guffawed. Then he walked up to St. Germain, and spoke in an airy voice that belied his dangerous words. “All right then, you douchebag, quit kidding around. You think you can take the high hat ‘cuz you’ve got more stuff in your head than us. Well, did you really think you get one on us just based on some booshwash from that third-rate newspaper of yours?”

A wrong word in this room could mean a punch in the face, a knife in the gut, or the worst, a bullet between the eyes.

This was what Klik implied, but the vice-president merely looked back at him without blinking.

“...”

Perhaps Klik was frozen by his unusually sharp gaze, because he didn't speak for a moment. St. Germain made sure that Klik was really going to be quiet, and then spoke to Placido. "Yes, you are correct, what we know is limited. For example...when your nephew Ladd Russo was arrested at the end of 1931, the white suit he was wearing had once belonged to you."

"Hh..." Placido's breath caught at this piece of information.

Klik was irrelevant, and the main target was Placido. The vice-president continued revealing Placido's secrets without hesitation, and his next words were as incisive as before.

"And when the officers saw that the name embroidered on the inner lining of the suit did not match Mr. Ladd Russo's identity, they prepared to investigate your involvement. If the suit was indeed on lend from you, Sir, it means that perhaps you had foreknowledge of his train heist."

"Who...who the hell are you?"

The smile had disappeared from Placido's face long before St. Germain had finished.

Placido realized that the tables had turned, and glared fiercely at his captives. He was the one who was supposed to be the one doing the threatening, yet all he could do was sit there, feeling cold sweat rise on his skin.

On the other hand, the vice-president only bowed and proceeded to answer his question in a professional manner. "May I humbly remind you that I have already reported this. I am named Gustav St. Germain, the vice-president of the Daily Days, merely a lowly 'information broker.' Please forgive my earlier conduct, but without proof of my knowledge as an information broker, there would have been little chance that you would believe me."

"...So that's it...you steal information, and then use them as blackmail?"

"Absolutely not. The spirit of our business has always been one, that is to take either information or monies as recompense, and offer the intelligence that our clients desire...though the information I had just presented earlier shall not be charged, of course."

Carol managed to process his polite words, and thought, I see, Mr. Vice-president is trying to turn these mafiosos into clients!

One aspect of the vice-president's repertoire was to be extra-courteous to clients. Carol, who had seen him do this a hundred times, also knew of another aspect.

--- Mr. Vice-president...he never picks and chooses his clients either...

Carol couldn't tell what the vice-president was thinking, just like when they had met the chairman of Nebula. She could only press her lips tightly together.

The vice-president probably didn't think about good and evil at all. He just treated everyone professionally, as his clients.

His poise filled Carol with admiration, but also a little bit of apprehension. Whatever the case, it wasn't like she could do anything to help, and the only thing she could do was to watch how things went.

Still, her own powerlessness upset her, and she clenched her teeth. She glanced at Placido quickly, but was so frightened that she started trembling again.

Placido frowned, and then narrowed his eyes as if considering something.

“This is just an example, but since you mentioned Ladd being taken by the cops, well, the day before...someone jacked a huge amount of dough from us, and then some delinquents put down one of my best men...”

“B-Boss!”

“Shut it.” Placido stopped Klik’s words to better concentrate on what he should ask the information brokers for. “...I know the nancy boy that killed my man is called Jacuzzi Splot, and can put a face to that name...But as for which scumbags stole the cash, I don’t even got a name.”

Placido didn’t seem to mind airing the dirty laundry of his family, but when he spoke next, his voice was lower and more threatening. “So, can you still come up with the facts just like that? Even when no one else’s got any leads?”

It sounded as if he would wipe them out if they didn’t have an answer, but the vice-president just bowed again. His lips parted in a smile and he slid smoothly from his role as journalist to his role as information broker.

“Well then, might we discuss payment first, my valued customer?”

“This is unsettling...Getting the low-down on them is so easy...”

Placido mused over the information he had gathered, and muttered to himself, “Isaac Dian and Miria Harvent...two idiot thieves...and they’re tight with Jacuzzi Splot, you say?”

“This is merely intelligence from a month ago, and therefore we hope that you allow for the possibility that in his past month, they have become sworn enemies.” This was a special information broker line.

Even though Placido had agreed to this exchange, he still looked suspicious.

“...to be honest, this doesn’t mean that I trust you. First, I haven’t come across a single information broker who ain’t a turncoat of some sort. Second, you might have been trying to bullshit me. So, before we find that scarred little kid and his big buddy, I must ask you to stick around a few days, as my guests.”

“I see.”

The vice-president’s answer was dry. It seemed that he was back to being a journalist, and not a shred of the solicitous attitude from before remained.

Carol managed to process this change too, but then she became preoccupied by what he had agreed to. A whimper rose in her throat.

“M-Mr. Vice-president!”

“Calm yourself, Carol.”

“But Mr. Vice-president! Doesn’t that mean...that we can’t leave this place? And Rail...” Carol paused for a moment and then turned to Placido instead, a fearful expression on her face. “P-please, Sir...w-what are you planning to do to Rail and them?”

Placido narrowed his eyes at this, but when he spoke, his voice was fairly neutral. “Before I answer that, Missy, I need to ask you a question first. As trade.”

“Uh...okay!”

“So, this Rail and company, who are they to you?”

Carol was stuttering with fright, but managed to instill as much certainty in her voice as she could. “Th-they’re my friends!”

“Yeah? Your boss just said you only ran into them today.”

“Y-yes...that might be true...but they...they’re still my friends! I-I can’t – there’s no other word to describe them...! Um...s-so I don’t understand the ‘became just acquainted’ part... S-so...I mean...”

The vice-president watched Carol gesticulate wildly as she answered, and sighed. “Carol, you really are quite obstinate. Such stupidity might, however, count as a virtue, and therefore you earn close to full points.” He sounded almost happy.

“M-Mr. Vice-president!” Carol’s features were all bunched together on her face, and it was hard to tell whether she was embarrassed, or intimidated, or about to cry.

Placido considered her childlike naiveté for a moment, and then said, “Hm...I see. Well, then, when your ‘friends’ arrive, I’ll let you see them. If you cooperate like a good girl.”

His smile revolted Carol, but she still gave a fierce nod of her head.

Placido seemed satisfied with her response and turned to St. Germain, who seemed to be taking it all in stride. Placido felt annoyed by this and gathered all of his bravado into a threat. “To prevent you from trying any funny business, you and this girl here will be separated, if you please. If I let you put your heads together, I’d be digging my own grave...Klik!”

“Right here, Boss.”

Placido’s voice was cold as he addressed his subordinate. “Put the man in a room – any will do – and as for the girl...lock her in Lua’s room, so we can keep an eye on both of ‘em.”

“Oh look, what a cute guest we have here.”

A woman started speaking with Carol after she was hauled down to some room in the depth of the Russo manor.

To Carol, it seemed that she had lived here for a while, and was also a prisoner, just like Carol herself.

The first impression of her that Carol got was a sense that she was slowly wasting away. The woman had a lonely little smile on her pale face, and she cut a figure that reminded one of how fleeting life was. A specter – that was what she looked like.

“Um...hello, nice to meet you.”

“I’m called Lua...nice to meet you too.”

“Oh, right! My name is Carol! Please...I’m sure I have to rely on you a lot!”

Carol wasn't sure exactly what she needed help with, but Lua's serenity somehow made her nervous. How long had she been locked up here? Would she suddenly go into hysterics on Carol? Or was she already insane?

The peace that this Lua woman exuded seemed a bit off, somehow.

"And why has Carol been brought down here?"

"Huh? Well...Um...I'm sort of like a hostage, I suppose..."

"Ah, well then, that would be the same as me."

Carol could only look at her a little blankly, and couldn't figure out what she ought to say next. She lapsed into gloom. Lua, however, still had a little smile on her face. But this smile did nothing to make Carol feel better.

And so, Carol, intern photographer to the Daily Days, began her sequestered life.

(Somewhere in Chicago, a few days later. Night time.)

Nothing untoward happened for several days after the bombing. Chicago slept peacefully, and the explosions caused by Rail were ruled out as an anomalous incident.

"It still feels uncomfortable." Chi frowned and expressed his dissatisfaction with everything that happened.

The shoulder that Graham had dislocated still felt sore. He was rotating his shoulder intermittently to check whether it was back to normal.

"It's obvious that someone covered it up," Sickle replied.

Then Leeza's voice rang out of the darkness. "It's probably Nebula or Senator Beriam...But the good news is, the cops over in New York didn't pay any attention to all of this, so things are still going smoothly. A little too smoothly – so we'd better keep an eye out for Nebula."

"Oh, the matrices suspended upon the universe's so-called divinity! The frost shakes us!"

"Oh, shut up. What the hell are you on about?"

The Poet had wanted to continue, but the memory of Sickle's kick still lingered in his neck, and he fell silent.

They were in the same place as they were before when they all came to Chicago. They all gathered now at the edge of the forest, close to the water.

The only difference was that Rail hadn't shown up.

On the day that they had all fought with Graham, they managed to escape by using the smoke from Rail's bombs as a cover. But no one saw Rail that night, and they hadn't seen him since.

Maybe Graham caught him? This was what everyone suspected, and they asked the Twins to find him. But the days went by and the Twins still had no news.

They knew that Graham, who was the main suspect here, still strutted around Chicago everyday. But the rest of the Lamia were afraid to act, since one of their own might have been held hostage. And Graham seemed

to be spending all his nights lounging in various bars around the city. After the bars, he went off to public squares or abandoned factories to work off the hangover. It was a wonder that he didn't seem to need sleep.

It was obviously a trap, bait to lure them out.

Although they observed him unseen, they couldn't figure out who was backing him. He had ventured directly into the fray but it didn't seem like he particularly wanted to win. Also, it seemed like he had no Achilles heel, so Leeza couldn't use her chakrams and hit him from behind. And they didn't want to kill him; he was their only lead to find out more.

"It's like this mechanic wants us to make the first move," Chi said indignantly. Then he thought someone else. "From how it was fighting him...probably only Christopher can win against him. But Christopher's not here, so there's no point wishing."

"Well, Rail's not here either," Sickle said immediately. None of the others wanted to bring this up, and her comment made everyone pause.

But then a wail came from the darkness beside the lake.

"Ooooooh, R-Rail...If I had known I would've picked him up and ran together..."

Frank's enormous back trembled with grief and his sobs travelled to where his companions stood. They didn't blame him, however.

"Don't worry about it. Rail's not like you – he can find lots of places to hide. And it wasn't like we wanted to scatter."

"That's right~. And he was the one who suggested we divide in the first place...I totally heard him say so. So there, Frank. Whatever trouble he's in is not your responsibility. And I think he was the one who started it anyway –"

"Leeza, that's enough," Sickle snapped, glaring into the air. "Stop pushing the blame around. You think you're part of some company bureaucracy? Or a senate meeting? Or are we all just bratty children to you?"

"Oh, come on...we're a proper setup too...don't tell me that dividing responsibilities clearly isn't important?"

"I don't care as long as you don't dump all the blame on Rail. Whatever objections you have against him, keep it personal. Right now his safety is the most important thing, or if Master Huey gives us any orders, right?"

Leeza was silent, but Sickle continued to glare in to the darkness.

"H-hey...wait...let's not fight..." Seeing Sickle's expression, Frank seemed at a loss about what to do. The Poet responded by clutching his throat and rolling back and forth on the ground.

Chi seemed bored by this. He sighed and said to the disembodied Leeza, "All right, let's get back on topic. I suppose that you called us all here today because there's news about Rail, or else Master Huey has new plans, right?"

"...Bingo, Chi. Got both right." The antagonistic atmosphere between Leeza and Sickle dissipated, and Leeza continued in her regular tone of voice. "Two days after Rail disappeared, Master Huey came to a decision. This shall be the ground for his experiment, not New York. Just as we guessed..."

"...Yeah? So what have you been up to these past few days?"

“Hey hey, don’t rush~. I need to get everything straight before I tell you, or else you’d go acting solo like Rail did.” It seemed Leeza couldn’t resist one more nasty remark. “Anyway, since Rail disappeared, the Twins have been looking all over...and they found something really interesting, only today. And it’s about that annoying mechanic...Right, do you remember what he said at the beginning, Chi? He said ‘My fighting style came straight from Ladd’...”

“Hm...yes, he did say this. Yelled it, more like...”

“And does the name Ladd ring any bells?”

“What?”

“Uh-huh. I forgot it too, before Sham reminded me. We’ve actually heard this name before. A year ago, in this very city.”

“What was that...?”

Chi started to furiously search his own memories as well. They did in fact come to Chicago on a year ago for a side operation. And those who were involved then –

“...Is he a member of the Russo family?”

They had completely overwhelmed their opponents and shown no mercy. Before he died, one man had yelled, rather pathetically:

--- (If Ladd...If Ladd was here...shit like you...!) ---

Chi remembered how he had answered: “This Ladd person isn’t here, and that’s the reality of this matter.” He raised his head. “So in another words, this Ladd is part of the Russo family, and the same applies to this mechanic, correct?”

“Bingo!” The air around them rang with Leeza’s laughter. She continued. “The guy in uniform is called Graham Specter, and he’s been in this city for a few years now, filling the position of a bodyguard for the Russo family. He was staying in New York ‘til recently, but I heard he had a run-in with other criminals there, and so he came back to the Russos.”

Leeza continued to laugh merrily, and matter-of-factly began to lay out their new orders. “It’s going to be tomorrow night. We’re going to straight to the Russos and look for their boss, and ask him exactly what he’s planning on learning from us.”

Because she was responsible for maintaining contact between Hui and the Lamia, her words counted for a lot. However, as one member of this strange, ragtag team, her position couldn’t yet be called a leadership position.

Still, no one contradicted her, so it seemed they all agreed.

“R-Rail...Is Rail there then?”

“If the Russos got him, then there he’ll be. Though we can’t rule out the possibility that he’s been captured by another organization, or maybe he walked out on his own...though I hope he isn’t so dumb that he’s decided to betray Master Huey at this point.”

“N-no way! Rail’s not a traitor! I, um...I’m gonna go too. If Rail’s there, I want to save him.”

Frank’s words made Sickle and Chi nod their agreement.

“Allrighty then~.” Leeza sounded very satisfied. “Anyways, we need to push aside everything that would get in the way of fulfilling Master Huey’s plans...”

Sickle spoke up next, and her voice wasn’t as sharp as before. “Still...this information doesn’t change the fact that this Graham Specter is dangerous. Should we use poison? It’s not like we have explosives – since Rail isn’t here.”

“Gee, it’s like man to man fighting is all you guys can think of...that’s why it’s such a headache for us. It’s easy – we just take care of it while he’s not around~” Leeza started laughing at how stupid they were, but then smugly revealed her trump card. “And anyway, we have a hostage.”

“What?”

“It’s like he has no one important to him, really. No girlfriend, and his family’s all dead...though, according to the Twins, there’s a young man he treats as a little brother in New York...and also, he trusts Ladd absolutely, like a god.”

Leeza didn’t seem like she would get to the point any time soon, and Sickle scowled. “So, the plan is to mobilize the Larvae in New York.”

“Nope... Ladd is the best hostage we can get.”

“Wait a sec...didn’t this Ladd person teach that little beast Graham how to fight?”

How could you take him hostage so easily?

Leeza laughed again, as if mocking at the unspoken doubts in her companion’s hearts. “Don’t worry~. Dealing with Ladd is easier than going after the others in New York.”

“?”

“Cuz in New York, there seems to be a bodyguard, plus my big sister too.”

--- Big sister? What does that mean?

Sickle was just about to ask this question, but Leeza’s smug voice rang through the darkness.

“This man called Ladd...he’s actually near Master Huey~”

“Because he’s a prisoner in Alcatraz.”

Everything was a dream.

Ever since the his consciousness had been born, and had been named Rail, this long stretch of teeming memories –

An incessantly turning dream.

They had all been “manufactured.” And among all of Huey’s various organizations, they held a special place – at least, that’s what Rail always believed.

They weren't human beings, but they weren't immortals either; they didn't age, but that was all. Incomplete, fleshy dolls – homunculi – that went against the laws of nature.

Rail had been created for almost fifteen years, and now his mental age was slightly older than his outward appearance. And it was five years ago when he realized that he shouldn't exist.

Five years ago, under Huey Laforet's orders, his skin had been cut open again and again.

Perhaps he would have been better off if he ran into a sadistic serial killer instead.

In his blurry memories, Huey's researchers entered and left his field of vision. Their faces were blank as they went through the processes of their work.

They had been expressionless, as if he were a frog. Each procedure was monotonous, like boiling salt water to get at the salt. All of the researchers had the same blank look in their eyes as they worked silently and without feeling, cutting into his body without the slightest display of joy or grief.

---Huh? I...I'm a thing.

This hypnotic thought surfaced in Rail as feelings of pain receded. He was shot full of anaesthesia and dissected.

If they could behave like children taking a knife to mutilate a doll, with their eyes showing glee or hatred, then that would have brought him a kind of redemption.

All of his self-concept came crashing down in that moment.

He had been young, just a boy, and hadn't fully realized this. The full revelation only came a few years later.

Compared to others in this world, he had been singled out for "special treatment." He had no right to a normal existence.

--- I...I'm not a person...but just an object...at least, that's what Huey decided.

This idea established the relationship between himself and the world. But there were still many things to work out, and Rail's mind turned in the pitch-dark lab.

--- So then, why don't we approach it from another direction...

--- Our existence is completely separate from the nature of things.

In fact, he did meet other entities like thing – and their abilities far exceeded those of normal human beings. If Rail wanted to see what normal humans were like, he could only do so through the newspaper, the radio, other researchers, and when he went, under surveillance, into the little town beside the lab. What he saw disappointed him.

And the first time he was sent on a mission to a big city, the humans there still couldn't surpass his expectations.

--- Really, is this all humans are...? No better than what I had thought.

This was everything for Rail. The reason he could survive this long was because of this feeling of superiority.

And therefore, he couldn't believe his ears when he heard, last year, that Christopher had lost to a mere human. When he heard it from Leeza, he thought she was lying. But then Chi had told him, "The man who beat Chris is probably some kind of demon or god, so don't run off and mess with him."

He had to believe it then. Chi wasn't a liar, and the best evidence in this matter was that he never saw Chris again.

After Rail had been cut open, Christopher had looked after him the most out of all the Lamia. Rail had seen everything Christopher had done from when he was very young, so the idea that "Christopher is the strongest being in this world" was firmly stamped onto his heart.

But then Christopher was defeated.

He wasn't defeated by an immortal, a homunculus – but a normal human being.

This truth was too harsh to accept, and Rail's heart was filled with despair.

--- Big brother Chris was actually beaten...

Leeza came up with the idea that "It's simple – this just means Chris isn't strong enough~" But Rail hadn't lost his faith in Christopher. He was confident that if anyone knew Christopher's abilities, it was him.

So, the only alternative was to change his conception of humanity.

When Rail was confronted with a fact that went against what he believed, it was his habit to deny it. He had always thought that he was on a higher level compared to human beings.

But this idea had been dashed to pieces by the man called Graham.

Rail was floating somewhere between his memories and his dreams, and he seemed to see the figure in a blue uniform prepare to strike him down. But then, the face of a woman in a white labcoat materialized instead.

--- No...don't come any closer...no...

"...D-don't...come...any closer..."

--- Please, help me...someone save me...

"...H...help...me..."

--- Help me...Christopher...Christopher!

"...me...Chris...Christopher!"

But then, as Rail screamed silently in his dream, a voice from the outer world reached his ears.

"What's up?"

--- Help...huh?"

“...Help...huh?”

And Rail woke.

When he opened his eyes and saw a pair of blood-red eyes and two rows of sharp teeth, he thought that he had stumbled from one dream into another.

(Russo Manor)

Rail looked at Christopher’s face and felt utterly confused.

“Huh...? Am I...dreaming?”

Rail realized that everything flashing before his eyes before had been sequences in a dream, and so he suspected that what he was seeing now was also a dream. But this dream seemed so real by comparison.

His whole body ached, but he still struggled to get up – and then he realized that someone had put him on a bed.

An unfamiliar room with a familiar face.

He was still suspicious about the reality of his environment when Christopher grinned, showing his canine-filled mouth, and laughed.

“Whoo, you’re awake, you’re awake! Finally! You were talking in your sleep just now, so I thought you’d come too pretty soon. This is great! Rail never disappoints me! To show my happiness, I’ve prepared three options for you! 1: Grab any random girl close by and kiss her. 2: Grab any random frog close by and kiss it. 3: Try your hardest to kiss yourself, though that’s pretty hard. So, which one sounds the best? I’ll give you a clue – for the third option, all you gotta do is kiss your own hand, so you don’t actually need to try that hard. I recommend option 1, but what do you think?”

“...2...?”

“All right, thank you for your participation in this survey. Oh, right, we need to see you performing your choice too, so you can’t not and just say you did. Well, this is wonderful. Since you chose the worst option, I must conclude that your mind is back to normal.”

“Wait...wait...Christopher?”

Rail still felt sleep clinging to him, and he widened his eyes at Christopher, who was sitting on a chair. “Are you...are you really Christopher?”

“Well, if I’m a fake Christopher, then that’s news to me. If I’m a doppelganger, then I’d be curious as to how he’s planning to kill me and take over my consciousness. Well, though, being able to split myself into two might make me more like human beings...so it might be a good thing.”

All this rambling actually managed to convince Rail that this was indeed Christopher.

When Rail was next conscious of himself, he realized that his eyes were filled with tears.

“Oh dear. Yes I know this is a touching reunion and everything, but really...?”

“Chris...you’re still alive! You’re really alive! Haha...ahaha!”

Rail shifted his stiff body so that he could turn towards Christopher. There was a bright, sincere smile on his face, which had none of the irony it had before. It was a genuine smile filled with childlike joy, and at the same time streams of tears ran down his face.

Christopher, though, only patted Rail gently on the head and seemed a little surprised. “...You’re scaring me a bit...actually you’re scaring me quite a bit. What’s going on? Why did you think I was dead? Who told you that? Leeza? Was it Leeza? Only someone like her would decide to bury me alive and not even tell me in advance! Whatever...I believe that she’ll get what’s coming to her from Mother Nature. More specifically, I’m sure she’ll see an extra ugly bug hopping towards her one of these days.”

Christopher’s flippant attitude made Rail wipe away his tears, and cry out, “I don’t care about getting what she deserves...but where have you been!”

“Well well...crying and laughing and now you’re mad...Rail, it seems like you’re a bit unstable now. And anyway, I’m the one with a whole pile of questions! Like, how come you were in that alley bombing yourself to death? Or, no, a better question is why are you here in the first place? Where’s your tail, Frank? Is Master Poet still as loony as he was before?”

“Answer my question first! Where have you been? What’s all that about fighting a normal human and losing? No, wait, where am I? How did you find me? What happened to those people in white lab coats? Oh, and that Poet’s getting worse and worse, I tell you!”

If both of them carried on with their own side of the conversation, things would get nowhere, and a calm voice spoke, which stabilized the atmosphere somewhat.

“Talk about being noisy.”

Rail was surprised to hear the voice of a third person in the room, and swivelled his head to see who it was.

What he saw was a child about his own age. He was sitting on a sofa with wooden accents, and deliberately turning up the volume on a radio.

“Even though there aren’t many people in the Russo manor now, if you keep on like this, someone will hear you. I can come up with lies and excuses, yes, but someone’s bound to see through them in the end.”

“...Who...who?”

--- Maybe a new member of Lamia?

Rail’s question was actually directed towards Christopher, but before Christopher answered, the young man with the golden hair answered. “Ricardo Russo. Pleased to meet you.”

“...Uh...nice to meet you too...huh?” Rail couldn’t help sounding surprised. More question marks appeared in his head.

Ricardo completely disregarded Rail’s incredulous look, and continued emotionlessly. “I’m very glad you’re woken up, but I suggest that you hide somewhere before members of my family find out.” He pointed at ladder leading to the attic.

Rail looked into the dark ceiling, feeling a bit lost. “Funny joke, haha...”

“Nope. It might come as a surprise to you, Rail, but he isn’t joking.”

“Even you, Chris? Come on, stop kidding around...” The question marks still lingered in Rail’s head, and there was a bit of uncertainty in his smile now. “Well, I don’t know exactly what happened, but I know that you saved me, so I have to thank you for that...but really, I have no idea what’s going on here.”

Christopher responded by picking up a piece of paper from the bedside table. “Um...Rail? I don’t know how to put this, but I’m as much in the dark as you. What have you guys been doing while I was away? You’d all have been caught if Ricardo didn’t see this wanted poster.”

It was the same poster that Rail had tossed into the lake a few days before.

“...How come you’ve got this?”

Rail suddenly realized something. The wanted poster had detailed descriptions of all of them – but Christopher, who was much more conspicuous than Sickle or the Poet, wasn’t on it.

A terrible idea flashed through Rail’s head.

“This is impossible...” he said in a frightened voice. “Did you...did you betray us?”

“Wow, what an active imagination you’ve got. Though I have to admit that I sort of hate myself for understanding how you came to that conclusion. I understand your reasoning, see, so I can’t really object. Is this...is this nature’s punishment?”

Rail thought that Christopher looked a bit defeated, but his eyes sparkled and he clutched Christopher’s hand tightly in his own.

“If you wanted to turn traitor, you should have come looking for me. I’d turn on Huey any day! I’ve wanted to blow him to pieces for a long time now.”

“Wow, such revolutionary ideas you’ve got. It looks as though you’ve been hating old Master Huey more and more all this time. I can totally picture sparks flying between you and Leeza.”

It seemed that both were still trading new questions and coming up with far-fetched ideas, and neither of them would actually start explaining. Ricardo looked at them and sighed heavily.

“If you both keep going like this, we’ll never get to the point,” Ricardo said, his tone a bit testy. “So, why don’t you take turns explaining what’s going on?”

(Placido’s private quarters, Russo Manor)

“Dammit...we haven’t seen a shadow of them since.”

At Placido’s growl, the men standing around the room traded awkward looks.

“Rumours has it that Graham beat them into a pulp...did they chicken out and leave Chicago altogether?”

“Well, we got our boys guarding the main streets and the train stations...”

Klik and his men were faced with a stagnant case, and seemed rather nervous. The calm certainty they had worn several days ago looked thin.

“Tch...if Nebula thinks we’re useless, we’re done for. You twits get that?” Placido was fuming, but then thought of something, and turned to one of his subordinates. “Bring over that so-called information broker, and see if he’s got any leads.”

The vice-president was fetched immediately.

“I’m not certain exactly what you wish to learn from me,” he said in a placid tone of voice. “However, my dear customer, how do you suggest I proceed when I have been severed from my sources?”

He didn’t seem concerned about his situation, but rather appeared as though he was the one who held all the cards.

“...Well then. You may go and re-attach yourself to those sources. Though keep in mind, we’ve still got the girl and the camera.”

“Your humble servant understands this perfectly.”

He didn’t seem ruffled by Placido’s implied threat regarding Carol, and left the Russo manor with brisk steps, as if to express that he had no more to say.

Klik watched him leave and frowned. “Can we trust him, Boss? He might just ditch the girl.”

“I don’t trust him anyways. We’ll sell the camera – and the girl – when the time comes.” Placido made it clear that he wasn’t hoping for much, and sunk into the sofa. “Ladd’s coming back next month. We need to make the foundations of our family unshakable before he does.”

“The Nebula goons...you think they’d keep their promise? About giving us some elixir or potion of immortality?”

“I actually don’t give a rat’s ass about that. The most important thing is that we hold all the cards. And for this to happen, we need to hurry up and nab those creatures on the wanted poster!”

Placido looked frightening for a moment, but then smoothed his expression over to reassure his subordinate. He smiled with satisfaction. “Don’t worry. If something goes wrong, I’ll do whatever it takes – threats, you name it – and make Nebula grovel.”

“Those assholes don’t know a thing about survival in our world. When it comes to burning powder, they’ve got nothing on us. I just want them to realize that.”

(The attic, Russo manor)

The word “attic” implies a cramped and musty space, but this attic wasn’t a storage room for odds and ends like attics usually were. It was spacious and smelled of fresh wood.

Christopher was lying in the centre of the attic, completely relaxed, but Rail was curled up in a corner with his back against the wall.

It had been several hours since Rail had woken. He and Christopher had each recounted their stories, and after that Rail had withdrew into his corner and lapsed into silence.

The atmosphere bothered Christopher and he got up and went to kneel down beside Rail. "Hey, Rail, you seem kinda out of it."

"No, I'm fine."

He turned his face away from Christopher when he answered, and Christopher smiled. "I can guess what made you unhappy. Something like this – 'What the hell! Christopher, you bastard! It was you who made me believe that we can exceed humanity, that we're above them...! So how come Chris made friends with some random kid? If Chris puts himself on the same level as common people, what are the rest of us supposed to do?' Right? I'm totally positive that I'm right."

Rail just looked blankly into space for a while, but then he heaved a deep sigh and shook his head.

"...Thanks for pointing it out. I feel better, thanks to you. I finally understand why I feel upset." He looked back at Christopher, and his eyes had a little bit of anger in them. "And if you add another sentence onto what you just said, it would be 'And the kid you made friends with, why does he look so weak, and why does he look like he's got something smelly under his nose all the time?' Haha!"

"Rail...your voice carries..."

"Too bad. And what's up with this room? I thought it was a hotel suite at first, and then you tell me it's his room? He looks the same age as me, and he gets his own private bathroom...Ahaha! Come on, Chris...don't tell me you just want to live a life of luxury too."

"Of course."

Rail saw the black and red eyes focus on his, and shut his mouth.

Christopher sighed and smiled in a way that revealed all his pointed teeth. "A life of luxury, a life of poverty, a life of illness, of struggle, a life of power and influence or a life of the common man, yeah, I'd like them all. I have a dream of living a natural life of a human being, and it doesn't matter what happens in that life. It's nice to have a dream like that."

At this, his smile faded a little. With a slightly embarrassed expression, he started to stroke Rail's hair. "Our existence is totally unnatural, so if we don't have dreams...what's the point of living for so long?"

Rail also felt a little shy. He peeled Christopher's hand from his head and sighed.

Suddenly, the sound of wood grating on wood interrupted their conversation.

Christopher and Rail turned to see that it was Ricardo, who had climbed up the ladder and now stuck the top half of his body into the attic. He must have heard what they were saying, but pretended not to have. He went straight into another topic without the slightest expression of concern or opinion for their previous one.

"Hm, so... Rail...? All right, we can find an excuse and ship you out of here today. I suggest that you don't go running around the mansion before that. It looks as though everyone in the family is out looking for you."

"...ship me out?"

"That's right. When we brought you in, we bought that suitcase there for you and your stuff."

Rail looked over into a corner of the attic, and saw a large suitcase. It was open, and he could see his things inside.

--- Well, this ambulance sure didn't cost much, though I'm not sure that's necessarily a laughing point.

He sighed, and Ricardo spoke up rather coldly. "We bought it especially to move you, so we shouldn't let it go to waste, of course."

"You're really good at pissing people off, you know. All right then, how about I set off some bombs right now and rock this whole house? I doubt there'll be a good end for you if they find that you've been hiding me up here."

What Rail said could be taken as a threat, but Ricardo didn't return the threat. He just sighed. "Never mind me. But you wouldn't want to get Chris in trouble, right?" Then he disappeared back down the ladder.

Rail waited until there were no more sounds coming from the entrance to the attic.

"I knew I won't like this kid. I knew it."

"Really? And here I was thinking that you could hit it off right away. And I was going to introduce him to Frank next time too."

Chris was grinning from ear to ear, and this incensed Rail. "Come on! Sure, yeah, I'm grateful for him saving my life and everything, but there's no need for that attitude of his, especially when meeting someone for the first time."

"Oh, Rail. He's just a kid. He doesn't know when to play the host and when to show how he really feels. Though I've never been able tell the difference between the two, either."

"How he really feels?" Rail stared at him in askance.

Christopher's answer was full of confidence. "I think he's worried that you're going to take away his only friend, so he's jealous!"

"..."

"Don't you think?"

Rail shivered and smiled a little ruefully. "I can't believe how blunt you are...I'm impressed...though I'm actually a bit disturbed that you've probably got it right."

"I've said so before, Rail...I've admired nature and humanity for decades... so it's from all that observation."

(Night time on the same day, before the Russo Manor)

The Russo manor was erected in the suburbs of Chicago, and it appeared to be a fortress of success.

It stood a little ways away from the other mansions in the area. The manor grounds weren't as big as a public park, but another house could easily fit into both the front and back yards. All of this was surrounded by a wall, two bricks wide, thick and solid.

At night, darkness blanketed the whole street, and the only light came from street lamps. But security guards surrounded the manor.

They didn't block the entrances like guards at the royal palace or at the border, but rather stood around in groups under the street lamps, pretending to be just chatting.

Of course all of them had guns hidden somewhere about their person, and although they appeared to be chatting, their eyes still swept their surroundings, ever vigilant.

And now, in the dead of night, one of these groups of men – the group close to the back gate – saw a man walking towards them.

It might have just been a passer-by, so the guards continued to idle around while they continued to watch his every move.

But the man, who had his hat pulled low over his eyes, didn't walk past them, but directly towards them.

“...”

The guards stared at him, on high alert.

The man suddenly stopped in front of them, and asked, “If you please, am I right in believing that this is the residence of Mr. Placido Russo?”

“...Hey, Mister, you ought to tip your hat before you go around asking questions.”

“...Oh, how rude of me.”

As he spoke, he pushed up the brim of his hat with one finger ---

In the shadow of his hat, his eyes appeared.

And suddenly, the guards felt a beam of light shoot into their brains.

What had shot the beam of light seemed to be the man's two eyes.

His eyes seemed to turn all the light from the street lamps into a pale blue, and reflect it into the eyes of the guards. The light followed its own mysterious course and swung lazily on their retinas, into their brains and their sense of time.

“Huh....What?”

The man opened his mouth and spoke to the rhythm of the swaying light. “Good work...Time to change shifts...”

“...Huh...? Oh...really...uh...right.”

The three guards stared into the man's two eyes as if they had just woken, or as if they were still sunk into their daydreams.

“Give me the keys to the back gate....”

“Oh...sure.”

The guard who looked like the boss in the group listened to this order blearily and reached inside his inner pocket.

The man in the hat took the key and continued his instructions. "...You are at peace...you have gone to the washroom, and this place is clean enough for a good sleep...The most important thing is that you have changed the shift over to me...you may put your mind to rest... So...you can..."

To the guards, the man's voice seemed to be getting more and more distant, but sleep overtook them and they thought no more of this.

Sickle, Chi and Frank watched the Poet and the guards staring at one another for a while, and when they saw the guards slide down the wall into a sitting position, they walked towards the gate.

The Poet's hat was once again covering his face, and he was muttering to himself in a very small voice.

"Oh, oh, 'tis an apple at my back which offers up these keys. The apple calls upon me to fling wide the gates of the caterpillar's shelter, so that my heart may find its closure...my guilt..."

"That's enough. Hurry up and hand it over."

Sickle snatched the keys away from the Poet without bothering to listen to what he was saying. There were two keys, and they looked like they were for both the main gate, which let cars through, and the smaller gate beside it for pedestrians.

"But is there a point to all of this? Can't we just ask Leeza to pinpoint Placido's location and go straight there?" Sickle's voice sounded a little mechanical. "What's up with Leeza anyway?"

Chi sighed. "I don't know why, but I haven't been able to reach Leeza in the last. No matter how hard I tried."

"...That sounds...bad."

Chi frowned. "I have the same feeling."

"H-has she been captured? Even Leeza...?"

Frank, who was behind Chi, started trembling, but then they heard Leeza's voice. It was softer than what they were used to hearing.

"...I...I'm...I'm here..."

"Oh, there you are...Wait, what's going on?"

It was Leeza's voice, but there was an obvious difference from how she usually spoke. Normally, she tried to make herself sound mature and confident, but now she sounded anxious, as if there was something after her.

There was a pause after Sickle's question, and then Leeza's voice blasted into their ears. "Nothing's going on! There's no point asking! You're not here anyway." She sounded a little hysterical.

"All right...all of you can keep going on your mission! I...uh...um...need to...wake up...I need to wake...up..."

"?"

Her mysterious voice echoed about them for a moment, and then disappeared.

“...What is going on?”

Everyone was left staring into space, but then Frank’s impatient voice sounded above them. “Wh-whatever the case, our mission now is to rescue Rail!”

Sickle sighed and nodded agreement. “There’s nothing else we can do except to keep going. The problem is that we don’t have a lookout anymore...If I or Chi opens this gate and someone sees, then they’d know immediately that we were intruders. So, it’s up to you, Poet.”

No one had decided beforehand that Sickle would take over the operation, but they needed a firm leader for what they were about to do. So no one objected.

The Poet nodded, took the keys, and went to the gate. He decided to open the larger gate, the one for vehicles, considering how big Frank was.

But Chi was worried. “Better keep ourselves small,” he said. “Frank can stay here for the time being. If Rail is indeed kept prisoner here, we need to be as secretive as possible before the final showdown. Open the other gate, Poet.”

Frank looked as though he wanted to find Rail himself, but then shut his mouth and nodded. “Hoom...okay.”

The Poet also did according to what Chi said, and opened the smaller gate.

Click. The lock opened with a soft noise. Then the hinges creaked faintly as the door swung wide. Chi peered into the grounds.

There was no one around. They could stay in the shadows of the trees and walk directly up to the mansion.

“All right...Poet, you stay here with Frank and wait.”

“You can get them to spill about Rail after we’ve cleaned everything up.”

Chi and Sickle disappeared through the gate, and Frank and the Poet went back out to stand on the street, where the Russo men were sleeping.

“Darkness is a form of madness, an upended coffer of gold. It imprisons sin after they are lathered with glow of street lamps, it permeates starlight...and wherefore, but on the will of the sage and the crone.”

Frank watched the Poet recite this into the air. “Hoom...S-sorry, Poet, but I couldn’t understand anything you just said.” This was probably close to what the average person would say at this point.

The Poet didn’t seem to mind. As the nonsensical words spilled from his mouth, he was actually calmly analyzing himself.

--- I wonder, though, how this ability came to be.

He looked at the three Russo men sleeping on the ground, and thought of his eyes.

--- Even I myself have no idea.

But his ability helped a great deal on their missions. He took care of the thing behind the scenes, and Sickle and Chi, who were fighters, took care of the rest. This mission should be no different.

However, something in the air seemed different today.

An unprecedeted defeat, Rail being missing, Leeza's odd behaviour.

Changes upon changes rushed towards him like a torrent, yet all he could do was to stand here like always, awaiting further orders.

--- It's like...it's strange...Where do I get this odd feeling from?

He felt as if they were not acting according to their own intentions and destinies, but rather that mysterious persons had hailed them here.

This ominous feeling clung to the Poet and would not go away.

(Front gate, Russo manor)

As the Poet was putting the guards under hypnosis at the back gate, incidents also took place at the front.

The guard at the front gate saw a strange vehicle slowly approaching them.

It looked like a cross between a bus and a truck, and on the vehicle was a large and shiny Nebula logo. It stopped at the gate.

And then, a woman hopped down from the driver's seat.

It seemed that she had miscalculated the distance from the seat to the ground, because the moment she stepped out, she fell with a smack to the ground.

“What?....ouch ouch ouch...s-sorry.”

She was apologizing to no one in particular, but then she dusted herself off and turned to one of the guards.

“Um...I guess Mr. Placido's told you already...”

“Oh, right, you're here for the scheduled checkup, right...”

“Yep, that's right!”

The other guards also gathered to check the woman's identity. They recognized that this woman had been a guest here before, but looked at each other.

“Mr. Russo did say you were coming...but what's with this truck?”

When she had come earlier, she had always come in a regular-sized personal vehicle, so they were suspicious about such a big one this time round.

The guest, Renée, felt all their eyes on her, and looked a little frazzled.

“Um...well, the checkup stuff we need to do today needs more people, so I brought like my whole team.”

The moment she finished speaking, the back compartment of the vehicle opened and a man in a white lab coat stepped out from the mysterious interior.

“What...”

Then, one by one, more men in lab coats appeared.

“W-wait a sec...”

Still, more and more personnel emerged. They were all carrying medical bags, and looked like pharmacists.

In the end, more than twenty people stood in front of the gate. The scene looked surreal, and their presence seem to put a strange pressure on the surroundings.

“Um...hey, what is this?”

The guards looked rather put out, but Renée flashed them an innocent smile. “Oh right, we need to drive the truck right into the grounds, if you please. That’s because we have tons of things to bring back!”

“Yeah, so you say, but that makes it difficult for us...us.....us...”

The guard who had been talking to Renée repeated his last words several times, and then suddenly collapsed to the ground.

“Huh? What’s going on?”

As he collapsed, Renée saw that one man had been standing behind the guard, and he was holding a syringe. The sounds of men falling to the ground came from all around her.

“They’d cause too much trouble, Director, so we can put them to sleep for a while.”

He said this without much feeling, but Renée looked rather nervous. “Um...I mean...hold on! How come you didn’t tell me first?”

“But we just did.”

Renée thought about this for a moment, and then clapped her hands together and smiled.

“...Oh right~! Then we’re good. Oh, when you drive the truck into the grounds, park it in the back first, okay?”

“Otherwise, someone might give us a tongue-lashing when we move the corpses.”

(Placido’s private quarters)

“Dammit...that goddamn information broker disappeared without a word...is he coming back or not...?”

Things had gone nowhere, and Placido was getting restless.

Then the telephone rang. Placido immediately reached his hands towards the shiny black phone.

He swallowed his anxiety and managed to speak. “...Placido speaking.”

“Ah, how are you this evening, my dear client?”

It was the man he had just been cursing. His heart skipped a beat.

--- He's not holed up somewhere spying on me, is he?

Placido felt annoyed and didn't answer St. Germain's question, but the latter didn't seem to notice this, and continued. "So, I have managed to gather a piece of information pertaining to your situation. It is quite urgent, and therefore I have taken the liberty of making this call."

"What is it? Is it about where they are?"

"No, unfortunately not. However, for you, Sir, the importance of this information far exceeds that of capturing your targets."

His words were very courteous, but the tone of his voice was strangely glib.

There was a moment of silence, and then Placido heard the vice-president's fluid voice speak a warning.

"You must depart immediately from the manor, and trust no one – if you want to live."

"What...?"

"I advise you to leave Illinois as soon as possible."

Placido felt as though his head was full of wool. "What the hell? Explain yourself!"

"Although our partnership has just been established, Sir, I must express my gratitude for this period of good rapport. I am planning to collect Carol shortly, and if you are still present at that time, I would be very happy to report to you the full details –"

With this, the vice-president hung up.

"Bastard! What the hell does that even mean?"

The vice-president seemed to be trying to warn him of some kind of danger.

--- I don't need intel like that, not the way I am now!

Placido considered his new ability, but the call his filled him with annoyance. "Collect...? And then a whole pile of bullshit..."

It looked like this information broker really did not know his place.

If he hauled the girl over and gave her a good thrashing in front of the cocky bastard, Placido mused, that might just teach him a lesson.

As he was preoccupied with his plans and was just about to call his subordinates ---

The door seemed to open of its own accord, and a mysterious figure appeared. It was an Asian man, dressed in foreign clothes, with long knives coming out of his hands.

Placido's heart jumped in his chest.

--- What the hell...?

Another figure appeared behind this man. This time it was a woman in a dress.

“So you’re Placido?” She spat.

Placido clenched his teeth. “You…you’re the ones on the poster…!”

“The purpose of our visit today is to ask where you got those wanted posters from.” Chi’s voice was quiet. He slowly began approaching Placido’s desk from one side.

“I – I’m going to call…”

“The guards around this room are all asleep,” Sickle said, and began circling around the other side of the desk. They formed a pincer.

Chi then shook his head, as if he felt a little sorry about what he was about to say. “And a number of them will never wake up.”

“Wh…”

Chi’s blades were slowly approaching Placido. But then –

There was a sound of a door opening with a bang. It wasn’t the door that Chi and Sickle had come through, but another set of double doors dealing to the front hall. Through this door, a strange group of people spilled onto the stage that Chi and Sickle had set.

A woman in a lab coat stepped out of the group and gave a big, silly smile. The tense atmosphere lifted a little.

“Evening, Mr. Placido! So sorry I’m late…Huh? What? Weird!”

She realized that the situation was not what she had expected, and hurriedly tried to make sense of it all. “Um…so what’s going on?”

When confronted with this scene, most people would think something along the lines of “Hey, hospital staff are making their ward rounds together or something.”

However, Chi and Sickle thought of something different.

They remembered the researchers in lab coats back in Huey’s lab.

For a moment, they were frozen by this unpleasant memory, but Placido’s expression lifted, as if he had seen a light at the end of the tunnel.

“Hey…hey…you’re just in time! These two are on the wanted posters, right?”

--- Tch!

Sickle and Chi heard Placido’s obsequious tone and worked out what was going on. Were these people the ones who were using the Russo family to find them?

“Don’t move.” Maybe it would work out better this way, Chi thought, and poked his claws into Placido’s neck. If he took Placido as a hostage, how these intruders behaved would help him fathom exactly what kind of people they were.

But this group didn’t seem to be on the same page as he was.

“Hm...”

Placido had knives pointed at his throat and couldn’t utter a single sound, but Renée just considered this for a moment before turning to her team, her head tilted in askance.

“What’s the best way to say ‘start’ in this kind of situation?”

Her team then vied to show off their various, random opinions.

“How about ‘Shoot?’” “That’s a bit bland, don’t you think?”

“Saying ‘Let the show begin’ sounds good, Director.” “You think we should add ‘Ladies and gentlemen’ before that?”

“Personally, I recommend ‘Let’s dance?’” “Yeah, great!” “Let’s go with that one.”

“Hm... ‘Alright, gentlemen, the operation begins?’” “Is that a quotation from a film?” “Maybe a novel.”

“Hey, how’s ‘Take off your top and take a few puffs?’” “I second that!” “Me too!” “Me too!” “Me too!” “Me too!”

“Eeeeeek!” Renée started screaming at the last option.

But then another man ignored her. “Well, Director,” he said as he reached inside his lab coat, “What about ‘Fire away?’”

He was holding a gun, sparks spitting out the end.

They acted as if Placido, Sickle and Chi didn’t exist. “Ah!” “You got it.” “So, Director, your orders?” “Wait, wait til I cover my ears.” “Never mind.”

The moment the first man had finished speaking, everyone else also reached inside their lab coats and took out their own guns – and began shooting at the strange formation of three beside the window.

(The attic)

Rail was listening to the sounds of water below them. “I still think that a private shower in a private room is a little over the top,” he complained.

“Sure.”

“Private quarters are already over the top, and then you want to install a shower too? Talk about cutting yourself off from the rest of humanity.”

He was about to continue, but then he heard a sound from far away. It wasn’t a sound they usually heard, but nevertheless it was painfully familiar.

“Shooting...?”

“Yep.” Christopher acknowledged Rail’s guess, his eyes glowing with happiness. “You think maybe someone wants you back?”

Then they realized that the water sounds had stopped. Then came the sound of the shower door opening. Rail scrambled immediately across the attic and down the ladder.

“Hey, it seems like something’s up. Looks like you might lose your cool soon,” he said sarcastically.

Ricardo had wrapped a towel around himself and was as expressionless as before. “Perhaps your friends want to rescue you. I can’t promise that no one saw you when we brought you here.”

Rail was disappointed. He had wanted to see Ricardo panicking and trembling from fright, but Ricardo just ignored him and started to put his clothes on.

He quickly pulled on his underwear and then went towards a coat rack, where his day clothes were hung. The fact that he didn’t put on the pajamas on his bed indicated that he understood how volatile the situation was.

--- Interesting.

Although Rail was disappointed, he noticed that something was out of place. He turned wordlessly towards Christopher.

“...”

Christopher, though, wasn’t as gloomy as Rail was. He grinned with all his pointed teeth showing, and his eyes danced. “Alright, so what do you want to do? Do you want to hide here, or do you want to come along with us and see what’s going on, and maybe we can hatch an escape plan? Or – if we meet the enemy, whoever it is, kill him before he kills you?”

Presented with three rather unappealing choices – to stay, to run, or to attack first – and Ricardo mused over them for a moment.

Then, as the host, he made his decision. “Regardless of what’s going on, it would cause too much trouble if someone finds Rail when this is all over...so the three of us should escape together.”

It seemed that Rail had not expected this answer, and he sunk deeper into gloom.

(Ten minutes earlier, an abandoned Chicago factory)

The factory was pretty close to the Russo manors, and it had shut down due to flagging economy.

Today, as always, the mechanic was waiting for his “enemies.”

Smack, smack. Graham lounged alone on a car chassis without wheels, fiddling with his wrench.

He had been playing the bait for several days now, but the enemies he had fought with never showed up. His gang tried to convince him to abandon his plan: “Only Boss Graham would be stupid enough to fall for something like that!” but he only replied, “No, I place my trust in them...even though we interacted only once and it was through the medium of my wrench, I firmly believe that they are like me!” and so, here he was, languishing.

“Ahhh, what sadness...how is such a tragedy possible...to trust in one’s enemy and be betrayed, this must be a new strategy! A strategy never once used in human history! I have a nagging suspicion that it’s not actually a strategy...but that must be a delusion. I’m not that stupid...”

At this point, a familiar voice reached Graham's ears. "Boss! We don't have time for stupid chitchat!"

"...Shaft, your inopportunity makes me sad. Why do you think I've been doing this alone? You come blundering in without a care about whether someone is following you, or whether they can take you hostage. And then in the end I'd have to come up with what to say to sacrifice you properly..."

Shaft rushed through the entrance and took one last jab at Graham. "So you've decided to sacrifice me already? Anyway, never mind," he said, and then yelled his news to Graham. "This is really not the time for jokes! The Russo boss...the freaks are mobbing his house...! And then a bunch of weirdoes in white robes showed up. It's a total mess!"

Smack.

Graham stopped playing around with his wrench. --- "I was too careless" he muttered, and he knocked his head lightly with the wrench.

"Uh, Boss?"

"...This is what makes life so interesting!"

His outburst made Shaft give a yelp of fright, but a smile could be seen playing about Graham's lips.

It seemed that the wrench had broken his skin, because drops of blood formed and fell onto his uniform. Crimson on blue made the blue seem black.

But the smile on Graham's face was even darker.

"Unpredictability is the spice of life. Aren't I right, Ladd?"

(The street beside the Russo manor)

"I, um...I thought I heard gunfire."

Frank and the Poet were still waiting at the gate. When they heard a series of shots come from inside the manor, they looked at one another nervously. Frank then turned to stare at the manor while the Poet scanned the surroundings.

"It's – it's probably Sickle and Chi fighting, right? Sh-should be fine...right?"

"Hey, Leeza, can't you see what's happening inside?" The Poet seemed affected by the unnerving situation, and spoke in a normal way for once.

But no one answered, and he asked again.

Suddenly, from the nearby alley came a voice between a shriek and a wail.

"No...Noooooooooooooooooooooo!"

"?!" "Huh...what?" Both Frank and the Poet froze.

"Ahhh...no...no, please! Papa's...eye...Papaaaaaaaaaaaaaa"

Frank and the Poet realized that it was Leeza's voice, but then –

“Why---! Wh...-----”

Her voice was suddenly cut off.

Her last wail echoed through the darkness, and after it dissipated, there was no more sign of Leeza's presence. Only the heavy air swirled in the sky.

“...What happened?”

It was inconceivable why Leeza was screaming, or why they suddenly lost contact. This unexplained event made the Poet feel as though something was crawling down his back. But then –

THUMP. A muffled sound came from close by.

“...?”

The Poet turned but Frank was gone. It seemed that the sound he had heard earlier was Frank vaulting over the manor wall and landing on the grounds.

“Frank, wait!” the Poet couldn't help yelling, but there was no answer from the other side of the wall.

He hesitated for a moment before rushing to the gate –

But then two figures appeared in the gateway.

“Chi! Sickle!”

“Run! Hurry!”

The rest of Sickle's words were swallowed in the staccato of gunfire.

At least, though, the Poet understood that whatever was happening in the manor, it was so serious that Sickle and Chi could only run away.

“Wait, Frank's still in there...”

Before he could finish, he saw the larger gate beside the smaller one open and a man in a white lab coat run out. The Poet also saw that he was carrying a gun.

It took two more seconds of hesitation, and then he ran after Chi and Sickle into the night.

Another incident must be raised at this point.

As the above was taking place, a sinister phenomenon occurred all across America. Everywhere in the country, with people who were totally unconnected.

Women of all different ages and locations, women who had never met each other –

They all started screaming at exactly the same time.

Some women had caused enough of a ruckus to be sent to the hospital, though of course no one knew what took place on Alcatraz and at the Russo manor at the same time. So, this incident was reported as a case of mass hysteria.

And afterwards, for unknown reasons, this case was lost to the darkness of history.

(Lua's quarters)

The sounds of conflict from outside made Carol so frightened that she had gone, trembling, to hide under the bed.

She had gotten the camera back when she was locked up, and now she clenched it tightly. Every time she heard a shot, she would give a short whimper of alarm.

--- But this is an opportunity! A shining opportunity for a reporter!

Carol imagined herself rushing courageously into battle and snapping photos, but the trembling in her limbs shook this idea into pieces.

She was torn between fright and disappointment at herself, but then Lua spoke.

“Don’t worry.”

Carol felt as though the soft voice covered her like a warm blanket.

“Oh... Miss Lua...”

She tried to steady her pounding heart and raised her head, but then a new voice rang out, accompanied by someone knocking on the door. Carol clenched her camera even tighter.

“Miss...Miss Luuuuuua, I---I will use a flashlight to momentarily blind him, so could you please...get ready to: ;”

Carol was so frightened that her mouth couldn’t form the words she wanted, but she stood up. At the same time, the door opened. When she saw who opened it, she couldn’t help a wail escaping her throat.

“Mr....Mr. Vice-priideeeeeeeeeeeeent!”

“Well, Carol, I recall saying a few days earlier...”

His face behind the monocle showed a slightly exasperated expression. There was still some severity in his voice, but he patted the weeping Carol on the head.

“...not to start screaming when you see other people?”

(Russo manor hallway)

“Say...Chris...”

“What’s up? And why the long face?”

Rail had been following Chris down the long hallway and now looked at him with a pout. Ricardo was following them a little ways away. Their plan was to make sure that both their front and back were clear.

Rail had his own backpack. He lowered his voice so that Ricardo couldn't hear.

"When I was watching Ricardo put on his clothes... I suddenly realized..."

"Mm-hmm."

"Ricardo is actually..."

Christopher seemed to have guessed what Rail was about to say. Although their situation was dire, Christopher was still trying not to grin as he nodded.

Rail saw his response and narrowed his eyes in suspicion, but revealed his suspicions directly.

"...actually a girl, right?"

Christopher tried to contain his laughter at how long it took Rail to spit out this question. He managed it and looked at Rail calmly. "Yeah. So what?"

"...You knew from the start?"

"Of course. I've lived with her for a year." Christopher's red eyes danced and he grinned. "She never said so directly, so I didn't ask, either. It's sort of like an unspoken agreement, I suppose. Though in the family, once the boss knows, and a few higher-ups. And of course the matron knows."

"..."

They had reached the stairs and the sounds of the gunfight were much louder than before. They had to be even more careful now, but Christopher still chattered on. "Now you're clear why there's a private shower?"

"Clear as day," Rail said a little shortly. But Christopher seemed even happier than before, and his smile made him seem like a little kid.

"Originally, I was going to make you run in there while Ricardo was showering and see whether she would start shrieking. But from the way she put her clothes on openly in front of both of us, I'd have to say no."

"Chris, would you mind if I blew you up?" Rail looked annoyed, and smiling evilly, reached into his backpack for an egg-shaped bomb.

Christopher, on the other hand, was just watching Rail happily while keeping his ear tuned to the noises outside. He detected that the sounds of shots had ceased.

He turned to head towards the source of the erstwhile sounds – Placido's quarters.

"I think you should save that for later."

(Placido's private quarters)

There were three sets of doors leading to Placido's quarters – one that went out to the front hall, one that Sickle and Chi had come through, and another one that lead to the residence wing of the manor. This door was suddenly kicked down. In rushed two figures, one with red eyes and the other with scars.

Sickle and Chi had already escaped. For a moment, the two new arrivals looked confused and stared at the woman in lab coat and glasses.

“Ah! Rail my dear! I totally thought you ran away, but this is where you were the whole time!”

“Huh...”

Her affable greeting made Rail’s entire body seize up.

A realization crossed Christopher’s mind: “Hey, they’re the lab coats that Ricardo mentioned” – but then he also realized Rail was really on edge.

“Rail, what’s wrong?”

“H...how...!”

It might have been because Rail’s perpetually smiling mouth was standing in contrast, but the shock and loathing in his eyes looked horribly vivid – and also mixed in was terror.

“They...I...I’m sure...I’m sure I blew them all to smithereens!”

“What?”

Two separate incidents came together in Christopher’s mind. It suddenly hit him that Rail said his would-be captors had also been wearing lab coats. When he used his remaining bombed, he didn’t intend to emerge alive, but then Christopher and Ricardo had found him.

Christopher examined Rail’s expression. There was really no mistake; Rail had blown them up.

He also realized there was something unnatural about this team of scientists.

Their encounter filled Rail’s mind. He had met them a few days before, but he had just woken for a few hours, and the memory was still terribly raw.

This women didn’t look like Huey at all, and didn’t talk like him either...Rail couldn’t remember exactly how the two figures melded together in his mind. When he had regained his composure, he had already detonated his bombs.

His coat was fireproof, so he wasn’t burned. As the bombs went off, he saw, very clearly –

The team of scientists scattering, and the woman’s neck snapping.

But here she was, alive and well.

“Are you... an immortal...?”

He was shaking from head to foot, and his teeth chattered. Even so, he managed to force out the word “immortal.”

The voice that answered him, though, was rich and deep.

“Yes...an incomplete immortal.”

It wasn’t one of the scientists who spoke, but Placido, who had been crouched by the windowside desk.

His clothing was riddled with bullet holes, but he looked unhurt.

“But you know, kid, if we stew your lot...we’d get the complete elixir of immortality.”

The scientists saw Placido’s greedy smile and smiled wryly at one another.

Christopher had been thinking – he didn’t think that this was just a bunch of scientists who happened to be immortal. The only person who was truly relaxed was Renée. The others seemed carefree on the outside and made jokes, but they also looked wound up and their eyes darted around the room.

Together they didn’t look like much of a team, but each one looked like he or she had some combat training. They would be able to fight individually if called upon.

Renée was surrounded by an immortal army, but Christopher still spoke to her cheerfully. “I see! I get it...you must’ve gotten this pack of guard dogs from the 1200 incomplete immortals in New York. Was that your puppy mill?”

Christopher had seen almost 1200 incomplete immortals last year, in Nebula’s New York branch. He knew he was involved now, and just shot his challenge at Renée to buy time.

But Renée tilted her head as if genuinely considering his words, and was confused by what he said. “Huh? Nope.”

“Really?”

“Hmm... Those were just vermin... or a better word would be rats, maybe? You can’t pick guard dogs from rats. You’ve got to give me more credit than that~!”

“...”

The one who was rendered speechless by Renée’s response wasn’t Christopher, but Rail.

He looked at Renée’s smug smile and felt as though someone had dumped a bucketful of ice water over his head.

--- She...she’s not kidding at all...

--- This is what she’s actually thinking...!

Renée sounded like she was being dumb, but she truly believed every word she said.

Christopher just shrugged, not backing down. “Well, guess you don’t know then. Over in India, they breed mice as guard mice – and they’re as strong as elephants.”

“Huh? Really?” Renée seemed to have fallen for it, and looked at her team in askance – “Impossible.” “Director, use your common sense.” “He can go to hell.” “Can I get a raise?” “Strip! Take your clothes off!” – and ended up getting another storm of random comments.

The only person who ignored their antics was Placido, and instead he turned to Christopher. He slammed a heavy fist onto the table. “Christopher... What the hell do you think you’re doing? nab that kid immediately!”

It looked like he had no idea how Rail came to be present.

Christopher, for his part, suddenly felt a little sorry for the old man. His lips twisted a little. He decided to still be courteous, since Placido was like him now – not really human.

“Pity...looks like there’s a conflict of interest here.”

“What...?”

Suddenly, there was a PING of metal against metal.

“Die,” Rail muttered through clenched teeth, biting back his fury.

Several egg-shaped objects flew into the air.

The explosions from the depths of the manor rocked all of the surrounding hallways.

“Ahhhhh! Mr. Vice-president! Wh-what just happened?”

“Compose yourself.”

“I can’t!”

“If you cannot do so for your own sake, you must consider steeling your heart for the sake of others,” he replied as he ran through the halls

His words made Carol involuntarily look back. Lua was running behind her.

Carol actually had to make her leave. She was a little uncertain and was worried that she might become a burden. “Please...are you sure it’s all right for me to escape with the two of you?”

At her expression, Carol felt braver. She straightened her back and squeezed Lua’s hand. “Don’t worry! We may look not look like much, but we’re actually information brokers...and we’ll definitely find a safe place for you before your fiancé is released!”

But the vice-president had other thoughts. “Charity is not a sin, however misfortune may befall all parties if you operate without a clear grasp of your own power. If you can remember this, I will aid you this time.”

“That’s okay! I have a really good sense of power with Mr. Vice-president here!”

“...Your are certainly quite impertinent. Though it might not be unsuitable as a Daily Days employee.”

(By the front gate)

“She’s not here.”

“What are we gonna do? Did she hear the bombs and run away?”

Rail and Christopher had leapt back just before the bombs had gone off, and they now tumbled into the front hall. They wanted to get away as soon as possible and were now searching high and low for Ricardo, but she was nowhere to be seen. Both Christopher and Rail thought that she wouldn’t have run away first, and so they went out into the front yard, but she wasn’t there either.

Rail was a little worried. “She wasn’t caught in that blast just now, right?”

“No idea. We just have to keep looking.” Christopher still managed to sound pretty optimistic, and turned to go back into the manor, disregarding the danger.

Rail didn’t move to stop him.

---Ricardo chose the run away option because of me.

He took a step in the direction of the house, but suddenly a familiar voice came from behind him.

“Fascinating...so then, tell me an interesting story.”

A cold shiver passed through Rail.

It had become a familiar feeling by now, and he asked himself, how many times had he gotten this bad feeling in this past week?

“Well...what’s going on?”

Rail turned his head to see the very person he had expected to see.

“You actually managed to blow up my patron’s house. That’s really...uh...what’s the best word... ‘Good job!’”

--- I get it now...he’s one of them too...

Rail watched the phantom afterimage that the spinning wrench was drawing in the air, and felt all the blood drain from his face.

He knew that he had paled. In his heart, he was madly trying to decide whether he could use a smokescreen to escape this round. But if they went back into the manor to look for Ricardo, would there be any chance of escape afterwards?

--- Dammit...this guy really makes you feel like a loser!

One part of him wanted to rush headlong into battle with Graham, but another part of him yelled for him to run away.

His hesitation was really a mark of his weakness, and most likely he would be defeated again.

In his mind’s eye, Rail saw what he would become a few seconds into the future, and suddenly felt that his whole life was terribly tragic. He couldn’t help the tears that welled up.

“What the hell are you going here...!”

New faces arrived. This time it was three thugs, and the one in the centre had a scar across his nose. And they had no idea who Rail was.

“Oh...so you’re the kid we were looking for. I just saw the manor go up in flames and was wondering what the hell happened. So it was you. Not bad for a small-fry,” Klik rambled disdainfully.

But then he felt a hand patting his shoulder. He turned and saw Graham, who had a smile on his face.

“Huh? What do you want, slug – ”

“Out of the way.”

Before Graham had finished, Klik had rose into the air and was flung into the bushes.

What had sent him flying head-first was a wrench. It had sliced through the air like a blade.

The remaining two men tensed. “G-Graham, you piece of shit!”

They didn’t get to finish. Another cheerful voice interrupted them.

“You’re right, they’re totally in the way!”

The new voice seemed to be a spell, and the two men began to spin, their bodies forming graceful lines of movement.

Their heads bounced off each other and seemed to roll in opposite directions, but then came back together sickeningly before falling.

The way their heads had knocked together was like balls in a game of clackers, or two firestones struck against one another. Concussed, their owners fell to the flagstones, unconscious.

Chris turned away from the two men he had just cleaned up, and his red eyes fixed on Graham.

“Good evening,” he said simply and politely, even though it looked like this man was Rail’s enemy.

Graham whistled in appreciation at how Christopher finished off two men at once, and tried to recall where he had seen him before. “Hey, so it’s Master Ricardo’s bodyguard eh? I’m a bit puzzled...you’re standing opposite me, so does this mean you’re gonna come between me and that kid there?”

“Yeah, pretty much. And Rail also told me that you took real good care of my friends Chi, Sickle and Frank too.”

“In other words, you’re asking for a fight.” Graham’s voice was uncharacteristically low.

“Gee, talk about jumping to conclusions. But yeah, that’s the idea,” Christopher replied, but then inclined his head to think for a bit.

“I’m really not sure about what to do. Should I jump in or run away? I know you’re superb – I’m very clear on that. But I dunno whether I’m better than you – I honestly don’t know,” he mused, as if to no one in particular. But then he divulged what had been bothering him for a long time. “Yeah, I was totally trounced last year in a fight to the death, and then my opponent took pity on my and let me slip away. And to tell the truth, I’ve been scared shitless since then. Couldn’t lift a finger against anyone. So actually, if we go for a round, I might get some of that old rush back.”

“So, to you, I’m...”

Christopher recalled his defeat last year, and gave a self-deprecating smile.

“...a chance at rehabilitation,” he answered.

“Remarkable! You’re remarkable! Interesting! I’ve been bored out of my mind lately! I don’t enjoy breaking people, as a rule...but it’s another matter entirely if I’ve got to give my all just to give them a scratch.”

Smack, smack. The wrench increased speed in Graham's hands, and excitement rose in his chest.

On the other hand, Christopher never asked whether he was facing an immortal, or perhaps even something beyond an immortal. He had acknowledged Graham's power, and was not afraid.

These two extraordinary beings seemed to spin a new dimension for themselves, a world which only the other could access.

A world that promised death and destruction, a terrifying, hair-raising world –

But a world where its two sole inhabitants looked genuinely happy.

--- Why...why am I frozen?

Outside the boundaries of their own little world, a young man cast down his eyes in dejection.

--- Where is it that I...really want to be?

Rail felt as if he had been utterly abandoned. His mind and body could only hover, swaying first one way and then another in uncertainty.

He had been left to fend for himself, cast adrift amidst the tempest.

(Placido's quarters)

“Godammit!”

Placido slammed a heavy fist onto the table, which had miraculously emerged from the explosion unscathed.

He and Renée were the only two left. The rest of Renée's team mostly ran off to the back of the manor in pursuit of Sickle and Chi. Renée considered their retreating figures, and looked as though she had just thought of something.

“Oh!”

“What...what is it, please?” Placido smoothed over his voice and looked in the direction that Renée was looking at.

What he saw was his trump card against Ladd, running away with the two supposed information brokers.

“Those assholes...how did they get away...! And they took Lua too!”

He felt a cold shiver run down his back. Although he was immortal now, Ladd's ruthlessness was still a force to be reckoned with, and now its possibility fell like a weight on Placido's heart.

Only an outburst could help him shake free of this weight. “That bastard! That traitor! Is he planning to sell my location off?”

In contrast, Renée was watching the same scene with a smile on her face.

“Hey, I was wondering when Mr. St. Germain would show up. I didn’t know you’d captured him already – what a pity you let them get away.”

Placido turned to her in surprise. “You...you know him?”

“What? Um...of course! You mean you don’t? He’s totally famous in the criminal underworld.”

“Ah, no...I had no idea.” Placido felt like she had pinpointed his lack of intelligence and shook his head with embarrassment. Renée, though, didn’t seem to see his expression and continued.

“Mr. St. Germain is like the vice-president of a national intelligence network! They’re really mean – as long as you’re willing to part with money or some equivalent intelligence and stuff, you can get your hands on anything you want!”

“S-say what?”

“And totally accurate intel too. They know who’s behind the scenes of every crime, even if the cops don’t know!”

Renée looked very proud of herself, as though she had just been advertising her own company. Placido started to hurriedly leaf through the documents on his desk, until he found the information that St. Germain had provided earlier. His eyes glowed.

“I-is that so! Then this must be right too...ahhh..Huahahaha! Bingo...This Isaac and Miria Pair’s gonna pay for what they did...and then I’m gonna wipe out that piece of tattooed shit and his buddies! Personally!”

“Um...actually...” Seeing Placido’s exaggerated boasts, Renée held up her right hand apologetically. “Actually, you won’t get to –”

“What...? What do you mean?”

“Sorry, could you show me your forehead for a sec?”

“...?”

Placido was suddenly worried that he was exhibiting some kind of side effect or some consequence of being an incomplete immortal, and lifted his head nervously.

“What is it? Is there a scar on my forehead or something?”

“Nope...incomplete immortal that you are, scars won’t be a problem.”

“...? So what’s going on? What’s on my –”

He was interrupted by Renée’s hand clapping suddenly on his head, and her melodious voice.

Interrupted, forever.

“Thanks for the meal!”

These words were the last words that Placido Russo, erstwhile immortal, ever heard.

--- Huh?

Frank, who was hiding outside the window watching all of this unfold, couldn't believe his eyes.

--- Wh-what just happened?

First, the woman in the white lab coat had put her hand on the older man's head –

and a split second later, the man's whole body had been sucked into her hand.

His body had boiled and rolled as if it was water entering a pipe, and then it had been sucked into the woman's thin and shapely body like jelly through a straw.

A good sound effect for it all would have been "slurp."

In Frank's mind, there was no other way to describe the scene except to say that the woman had used her right hand to eat him.

Frank had witnessed countless bizarre events, and he was himself a bizarre event. But even so, this scene scared him out of his wits.

--- I – I must tell everybody...

He rotated his giant body, but then a voice cut in from below.

"Don't move."

As this voice spoke, Frank heard an explosion from outside. The explosion ricocheted into his eardrums and rattled his head. He felt something strike his leg.

"Ow-ouch!"

He thought someone had hit him, but he was mistaken.

He looked down at his leg, and saw what looked like crimson flowers bloom on two sides of his thigh.

Around the area dyed red, he could feel a strange numbness freeze the muscles of his leg.

His sensations teetered between pain and numbness before the former won, and pain lanced through his entire body.

"Ow....OOOOOOOOOOOWWWWWWWWWWWAAAA!!"

Frank gave an indiscriminate scream, but then he heard men around him speak.

"Wow, great shot. Never mind the bullet going right through - it's admirable that you've managed to avoid hitting the bone."

"Say, was it okay to shoot him after telling him to freeze?"

"Yeah, why not? It's not like we're soldiers or anything. We don't need to follow military protocol."

The men's conversation was like an everyday chat, but then came the sound of a window opening, and they were interrupted by a frantic female voice.

“Um...so what just happened – Oh! This giant baby here, I think I remember his name, um...Frank, was it?”

“Yes, Director. The others – I mean the one in the hat and the martial arts girl and the rest – they ran off really quickly and we couldn’t catch up. But then we came back and saw this thing hiding in the window.”

“Oh? So...did he, like, see everything that just happened?”

Renée turned pale, and the men around the window started gloating.

“Yes, Director. He saw right into you.”

“This is why we told you again and again that you need to be aware of your surroundings.”

“We hope you will learn from this mistake.”

“And start checking things out properly.”

Renée felt her subordinates were ganging up on her, and tried to change the subject by turning to Frank.

“Anyway, wow, huge. Looks like we need to use the truck’s back compartment,” she said with a leisurely air as she looked Frank up and down. Then she clapped her hands together and smiled. “Well, if the anaesthesia wears off halfway, he’s probably going to struggle and cause an accident. Sooo, you need to give him three or four times the regular dose, okay? Oh, and just to be on the safe side, let’s cut the tendons on his wrists and ankles!”

Her white-robed men surrounded Frank, preparing to carry out her cruel orders without the least hesitation.

Frank saw the blades pointed towards him, and a memory awoke in his mind.

The image that flashed before his eyes was of similar white-robed scientists. They had been in Huey’s laboratory, and the scientists had approached him and Rail with scalpels.

The pain and terror of that time rose in his heart, clouding his perceptions.

When he again became aware of his surroundings, he realized that he was screaming, screaming the name of the young man who had shared his fate.

“R-Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiil -----!”

“...Frank?”

At this sound from inside the manor grounds, Rail froze as though he had been electrocuted.

Frank had been his friend ever since he awoke to a sense of selfhood, and had been with him as they faced the twisted operations of Huey and his scientists. His scream bathed Rail in a wave of cold sweat.

After a moment, Rail realized that he was already running towards the source of the sound. Christopher, who was distracted for a moment from Graham, yelled after him.

“Hey! Hey, Rail!”

Rail ignored him and dashed towards the back of the manor.

Graham seized this opportunity and aimed his wrench towards Christopher's joints, but the latter instinctively sensed this a split second before contact, and jumped a huge step back.

"Let's pause for a moment, okay? Listen, I'm not armed right now, and I lost my weapons last year too."

"I'd like to answer with 'Kiss my ass' but whatever, let's hear what you've got to say. What do I gain from letting you go?"

"All right, if you put it that way, how about I give you space next time you find yourself without a wrench, how does that sound? So give me a break on this one."

"...you're funny." Graham was still twirling his wrench and narrowed his eyes in amusement. "Since this is all going so well, how about we play for a bit longer?"

"Dammit, there's no convincing you is there. All right then...time to get out the big guns eh?"

Christopher's canines clacked together and he grinned – but then...

Both were blinded by a pair of headlights, and heard the sound of an engine revving.

They turned instinctively to see a car bearing down on them.

"?!"

Both leapt back just in time, and the car blocked them from each other's view.

Graham was sure that the driver must be another figure on the wanted poster, and was just about to jab his wrench towards the driver's seat –

"Master Ricardo...?"

- and realized that the driver was actually Placido's grandson, and hurriedly pulled back his wrench.

"Ricardo."

"Get in!"

Christopher didn't need telling twice. He jumped into the seat beside Ricardo.

The car lunged forwards and Christopher was plastered against the back of his seat.

Ricardo's driving was rather ferocious, but Christopher collected himself and raised a more fundamental issue.

"...You can drive?"

"At least I know which one is the gas and which one is the brakes!"

Ricardo rarely sounded so confident and emotional, and Christopher looked at her in surprise. Then he saw that Ricardo was sitting on the edge of the driver's seat in an effort to step on the gas pedal. If she sat all the way back, she wouldn't be able to reach it.

Christopher suppressed a shiver and smiled wryly at this.

“...Can you stop the car? Let's switch.”

(The back yard)

“Frank...?”

Rail had run all the way to where he heard Frank's voice, and this is what he saw:

The giant toddler, his childhood friend, with his huge body bathed in blood.

His four bloody limbs were limp and Rail couldn't detect any movement from him at all. A group of men in lab coats were trying to stuff him onto the back of a transport truck.

“Frank---!”

His scream made the men turn their heads as one.

He thought that Frank might have given him a glance, but that was a delusion. Frank was already unconscious.

“Let him go! Let Frank go...!”

Rail reached into his pockets and an egg-shaped bombs, and targeted several men who were far away from Frank's form. He saw the men raise their guns, but firmly put his finger through the pins ---

But then he froze.

Because one of the men had pointed a military-issue rifle at Frank's body.

“...!”

A tremor passed through Rail's body, and he couldn't move an inch.

“Oh? Did...did you come especially looking for me?”

“I don't get it...I don't get why Mr. Huey made you develop a sense of concern for the bodies of other research subjects.”

“...!”

“Wait, maybe you're actually a special version from, like, some research about human emotions. Or maybe you were a human to start but then got modified?”

Her outrageous words made Rail speechless once again.

Renée was looking at Rail in complete puzzlement, and the men around her tried to change her mind.

“Director, asking the research subject directly about the results would make the research invalid, right?”

“See, look at the smile he has on his face. I think he looks down on you.”

Their words were casual, but for Rail, they melded into the memories of the scientists at Huey’s laboratory. A sense of despair overtook him, and his finger on the pin shook.

After a volley of reproaches from her team, Renée also seemed to despair. But then she seemed to pick her spirits up and clapped her hands together.

“Well, aren’t we lucky!” She pointed at Rail. “Take that child too, so we can get reliable results twice. And he looks different from Mister Poet and Miss Sickle— it looks like Huey operated on him in person.”

The men in lab coats acknowledged this naïve hypothesis with warm smiles ---

But a moment later, they had turned to Rail with cold and cruel features.

“Got it.”

The switch from play to work for them was quick, and they looked at Rail as though he was a lab rat.

“No...”

A multitude of traumatic memories broke like a wave over Rail, and he could scarcely hold the bomb in his hand.

Seeing the men approach him with their weapons at the ready, Rail suddenly felt sick to his stomach, and his knees started to knock together.

I’m going to collapse.

Blow these vermin into shreds.

Run.

But I need to help Frank...

Conflicting drives rose and fell in his mind, but none won in the end.

Is this it...?

Rail felt as though he was losing it, and about to scream ---

The sound of a car engine cut ahead of his scream, and a moment later, a car barrelled into the backyard.

“Better hold on, Ricardo, It’s gonna be a rough ride!”

“What...?”

But Christopher had stopped speaking, and instead stood with one foot on the driver’s seat. He was stretched sideways with the other foot on the gas while popping the card door open and rapidly turning the steering

wheel. The car planed sideways and the open door slid neatly up to Rail – a moment later Christopher had grabbed Rail and tossed him into the car.

Christopher realized that Rail was still clutching a bomb, and quickly shoved him towards Ricardo on the seat beside him while plucking the bomb away from Rail's small hand.

Then he stepped on the gas pedal all the way, and the car shot forwards, leaving the team of white-robed scientists far behind.

The scientists lunged forwards to chase the car ---

But then they saw the small egg-shaped object that had been left behind. They jumped back.

The bomb went off just as everyone dove towards to ground.

“Yikes!”

Renée was a step behind the rest of her team, and although she didn't take a direct hit, she was still knocked flying.

Rail didn't see any of this. He sat in the back of the rumbling vehicle with his face pressed against the back window, screaming.

“Frank...Frank...!”

“Better wait. If you go back now, he's going to be caught in the crossfire for sure!”

Christopher's voice was uncharacteristically severe, and Rail was opened his mouth to protest. But the Russo manor was disappearing from view, and he shut his mouth and crumpled in his seat. All that remained in the vehicle was an atmosphere thick with despair.

“They got away...”

Renée coughed softly a few times and stood up.

“But that's okay!” She tried to encourage her subordinates and herself. “I'd say there's an eighty percent chance they'd come back for this giant here...um...Frank my dear, we'll reel them all in when the time comes! Honestly, everything is going according to plan!”

“Hm...what's the point of lying now?”

Renée maintained that this was the plan despite glares from her team. Her next words were totally inappropriate – though from a certain point of view, they were the most appropriate words she could say.

“Soooo...even if this experimental subject dies, we can't tell anyone!”

“Looks like it's really gonna go.”

“Yep. It's fifty-fifty whether it'll live. But c'mon, we've got to try and keep it alive,” she said firmly, a warm smile on her face. What followed was the cruellest of resolutions.

“Because a live subject means more experiments!”

(The front gate)

“...is this a tragedy...or a joyful story?”

“C’mon, Boss! It’s too dangerous here! We need to make tracks now!”

The Russo manor was the site of constant peels of gunfire and explosions.

Graham, who was standing at the front gate, had one arm seized by Shaft, who then tried dragging him forcibly away.

“I have no idea what happened, but it looks like those doctor people weren’t interested in us at all!” Shaft thought that this was a good opportunity to escape, but the white-coated scientists had long disappeared from Graham’s mind.

“The one with the red eyes...fascinating... utterly quite fascinating. I’m actually touched.”

He recalled how they had faced off a moment before, and turned his back on the manor, spinning his wrench with joy. “It looks like a story both sad and happy will come to pass before Boss Ladd is released, doesn’t it?”

The bones in his neck snapped as he stretched, and the spinning wrench gained momentum.

“At least it’s a story that won’t bore me.”

The wrench drew continuous circles, with no sign of stopping.

Spinning and spinning and spinning,

Maniacally, insanely, madly spinning ---

(Somewhere in Chicago)

Christopher had driven them far from the Russo manor, and they arrived at last at a lakeside park.

He was thinking that they had shaken free of pursuit, but then Rail spoke up from the back seat, his voice as feeble as the buzz of a mosquito.

“...Sorry...could you...let me off here?”

“What?”

“I never planned on moving with you two...thanks for saving me and everything, really...but that’s enough. Let me off here.”

Ricardo looked worriedly at Christopher, but couldn’t tell what he was thinking. After a moment of silence, they approached the widest part of the road, Christopher stopped the car wordlessly.

“...thanks.”

Rail opened the car door on his own and jumped out, and then began walking in the direction of the woods at the back of the park. Then, as though all his energy was spent, he collapsed onto his knees.

“...Hnnnn...”

His breathing was ragged as he knelt in the mud. He didn’t know when Christopher had gotten out of the car, but now his voice came from behind Rail.

“Rail, you okay?”

Rail didn’t answer, but instead turned a question on Christopher. “What...what’s going to happen to Frank?”

His gaze seemed to say to Christopher that whatever Christopher said, it would be his final hope.

“Well...they’re probably going to bring him to Nebula headquarters, or to the factories at Elson Hill. Because that bunch looked a lot like the scientists working with Huey...so Frank will probably get the same treatment...so...like...they’d kill him right away – if he’s lucky.”

“Yeah, I think so too,” Rail said, and remembered the woman and her white-robed team, and remembered his own past. “That woman doesn’t look or talk like Huey, but I swear they’re all the same on the inside...they looked at me as if they’re looking through a goddamn microscope...and when I saw them I remembered all of it – my body, and what they did to me...!”

Rail’s shoulders trembled, but there was still an unnatural smile tugging at one side of his mouth. Tears of rage and horror filled his eyes. “What the hell...what are immortals anyway...Tell me who they really are, Chris, those scientists...and that woman, and Huey...What the hell are they! and us...what the hell are we...”
Sobs escaped his throat.

He had started muttering to himself to relieve some of his terror, but voicing his thoughts just made it worse, and his voice began to tremble. “If we’re unnatural, if we’re not human, then what are they supposed to be? They’re not the same as us at all – they were human beings to begin with, and screwed themselves up, so doesn’t that make them a hundred times more the freaks than us?”

Rail could bear it no more. His face crumpled and weeping burst out from his chest.

“Ahhh....ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Ahhhhhhhhh!”

His heartrending wailing could not stop.

“Ahhhhhhh....ahhhhhhhhhhhhh...ahhh...ha...haha...”

At some point, his tears turned into laughter, though it sounded like noises from an old and off key accordion.

“Haha...haha...ahahahahahahahaha! Ahahahahahahaha!”

“Rail...”

The glint was back in Rail’s eyes, but Christopher just stood beside him, motionless, and looked at him sadly.

Although Ricardo was still waiting in the car, Christopher didn't look like he was about to lift Rail and guide him back into the car. He only turned his red eyes up to the starry chaos overhead and continued to listen to Rail's cries.

"Hey...am I weird or what? I – I feel horrible, Chris, but then I just laughed and laughed...Don't you think that's super weird? Why aren't you laughing? C'mon, Chris, let's hear you laugh! Haha...ahahahahaha! Ahahahahahahahahahahahaha!"

"I have laughed like that before – I just don't remember why."

"Hahaha! Hahahahaha! Hehe...heee...ahahaha!"

Perhaps it was because he was laughing so hard, but the scars on Rail's face began to crack, and blood started to well up all over his face.

But Rail didn't seem to notice. He continued to laugh, and tears continued to fall.

Christopher didn't seem to mind either. "Maybe that's the miracle...when people really hit bottom, they can laugh. Maybe normal people are like this too." He seemed to be musing to himself though, and didn't seem to mind whether Rail heard him or not.

"But...afterwards...I think I really went insane afterwards."

"Hahaha...Ahahahahah! Ahahahahahahaha!"

"So, Rail, I'm not going to stop you. I can't, and I'm not going to."

"Haha...haha...ha...Ahahahahaha...ahahahaha..."

"What's the best way to put this...well, I guess I'm already broken, so I can't put you back together again. If you want to come over on this side, I can help you over, sure. But I think you're standing at the crossroads...and which road you take is up to you."

"Haha...ha...haha..."

"My only wish is... there'd be someone whole who can put you back together..."

Christopher's words were from the heart, and with these last words, he prepared to rejoin Ricardo in the car. "So that you can continue to exist, as a human being."

"Haha....huh...? Ha...haha..."

"I admire human beings, so right now I kinda envy you, actually, haha"

"..."

"I'm going to work alone for the time being...but anyway, I'm still Ricardo's bodyguard, so I'll mostly follow her inclinations...If you want to join up with us, I don't mind, but I right now there's no way I can say, 'Come with us.'"

Rail watched Christopher's figure shrink into the distance and didn't go after him. Christopher's attitude was cool, even cold, but Rail couldn't find it in himself to blame Christopher, or to beg him to stay.

The only thing keeping Rail company was the echoes of his own laughter, soon to dissipate into the air.

Then he heard the sound of the engine starting, and he couldn't see Christopher anymore.

"As a human being? A human being...?"

Tears again started to stream down Rail's face, and he screamed into the darkness.

"That's not funny, Chris...How do you expect me to laugh at that, Chris?...Christopher!"

After a seemingly timeless interval, Rail's laughter had stopped, though he was still kneeling crumpled on the ground like a broken doll.

He pulled himself wearily to his feet.

"Sham...Hilton...help me..."

A smile still lingered between the stitches by his lips, but the look in his eyes was not like the Rail of the day before.

"Frank...if you're still alive...I'm going to save you, I promise."

"And you...you bastards in lab coats...you're not getting away this time...I'm going to blow you all to pieces."

The only thing that answered him was the limitless darkness.

"And then, I'm going to blow up Huey...and all those assholes who cut up me and Frank...All of them...all to pieces."

At this resolution, Rail seemed to cheer up a little.

His small, thin voice continued to disperse into the icy air, but his words were hard with resolve.

"And then....I'm going to blow up anyone who rejects us...I'll flatten this city and become legend...and then we'll go on to the next city and blow up that one too."

"All our nightmares will go up in smoke...one by one!"

Later that day, at noon...

A series of explosions went through Elson Hill, and the din was heard as far away as Chicago. After days of investigation, it was still unclear where the explosions had started. People could only deduce that someone had used timed explosives to make all the bombs go off at once.

Then news got out that all of the targets of the bombing had been Nebula property, and that the bombing was probably a terrorist attack on Nebula. Even staff at the Nebula headquarters in Chicago seemed shaken by this, and were anxious and terrified by turn.

The town of Elson Hill was humming with unprecedeted anxiety, and even now there were still fires and smoke rising from the town.

However, the citizens of Elson Hill would soon come to consider this sudden attack as nothing more than a mere herald for what was to come.

In the suburbs far from downtown Chicago, in the corner of a dim little bar, the Poet heard the news about Elson Hill blaring through the radio.

He turned to Sickle, who was sitting beside him in silence. "...Do you think it's Rail?"

Sickle still had a grim face on. "Did you get up from the wrong end of the bed today? How long has it been since you talked like a normal person?" But then she answered the Poet's question. "No doubt. Who else could it be?"

"Is he planning on rescuing Frank? Then he's really taking a risk. And...it's impossible for one person to plant three hundred bombs in such a short time. This smacks of Sham and Hilton's involvement..."

The Poet's voice was totally devoid of emotion as he tried to assess everything objectively, and this made Sickle's frown deepen. The Poet reminded her of something else.

"Sham and Hilton...and even Leeza...they've disappeared. What's really going on?"

"Only the ones in Chicago have disappeared...at least that's what I hope."

Chi wanted to break the stalemate they were facing, and had left for New York that morning to join Tim and Adele.

Before, they had all agreed upon this bar as the rendezvous point, but neither the Poet nor Hilton could guarantee that the situation wouldn't change drastically again before they could all gather.

The radio had ended the announcement about Elson Hill, and launched into another report about mass disappearances in Chicago. This also piqued Sickle and the Poet's interest.

"What do you think about these disappearances then?"

Sickle looked as though she thought that the Poet was asking the obvious. "There's no evidence right now...but I'm afraid it's Sham and Hilton too."

"The bomber and the kidnapper may appear to be separate perpetrators, but they're actually collaborators...it's kind of funny if you think about it."

"This will just go over the head of the average person. But us, and those people in white lab coats – we're monsters." The situation was bleak, but Sickle remained staunch.

The Poet, on the other hand, seemed to be amused, and smiled.

"We're surrounded. It's a checkmate."

His words were like a riddle. "...What?"

"It is not this city that has transformed into Alice, but us, and the Russo family. Rail, Frank, and that mechanic – they've all become Alice. Nebula is playing the White Rabbit, and has drawn all of them into Wonderland."

"..."

“And so, where is the exit? How will these numerous Alices be delivered from their captivity? Who is the Queen of Hearts? Perhaps the woman leading the team in white?”

The Poet’s words gradually lapsed back into a dramatic monologue.

He ended his speech with a question that seemed more directed at himself than anything. “However, of the most import is...do we truly need to awaken?”

Sickle watched him end his speech abruptly and begin to drum his fingers against the table. She was silent for a moment. Then, without looking at the Poet, she uttered words that also seemed to be addressed at herself.

“Back to talking like that, I see.”

The thundering of fresh explosions seemed to come from far away ---

In the wide Chicago skies, the sound quickly travelled up to the clouds ---

Only the bright blue sky remained, a sentinel over the city, as though nothing had happened.

Connecting Chapter: Reports Beyond Common Knowledge

(A New York café)

And what I have to say comes to an end.

So, Miss Hilton, do you still take an interest in what occurred afterwards?

If you choose to leave without a word and resume your usual operations, I will not pursue you and force you to listen to the truth. To be honest, that would be a waste of my time.

...But I am sure your imagination can take care of the rest.

I have great faith in your powers of deduction. The depth and scope of your knowledge far exceeds those of a mere information broker, after all.

And if you cannot, even at this time, detect the “betrayal,” then I must say that I am amused.

Before I continue, there is another matter I should disclose first.

Disclosing this matter will make it easier to speak of Mr. Isaac Dian and Miss Miria Harvent, set the stage for their entangled reunion, which I intend to do shortly.

Perhaps you are finding this difficult to accept. Well then, I will tell you this first.

I am simply raising – or rather, forcing you to listen to – this, Miss Robber. As I said in the very beginning, that you may already have an inkling...

...that you will learn what you do not wish to know.

All right, let us begin.

What I am about to relate occurred behind the scenes – specifically, behind the scenes of Alcatraz.

Ah, well – The moment I mentioned it, I see that realization has hit home. You have accepted the truth.

The truth that there exists a traitor in your midst, who has passed this intelligence to me –

(Alcatraz)

Backing up a little, to the night before all of Chicago was rocked with explosions –

Firo felt the eyeball lurch feebly in his left hand. He sighed with irritation.

They were in the level below the Dungeons.

The occupant of this cell, the immortal, now lay prone on the floor with a knife stuck deep into his neck.

Firo Prochainezo, also an immortal, looked at the body of the immortal man, the puppet master, and shook his head wearily.

“Hey...”

The person who had called out to Firo was a man who was standing before him and watching his every reaction.

This man – Ladd Russo – looked in forthright askance at Firo, his left arm hanging limply at his side.

“Right now I have absolutely no idea where’s where. So what the hell is going on?”

The reason that Ladd have come down to this place on a quest – to kill the immortal Huey Laforet – even though this seemed like an oxymoron.

Three assassins had stood in his way and he had knocked them senseless. Then he had defeated the “fairy,” Leeza. In the end, two immortals remained.

And then one of them had stuck a knife into the other’s neck.

“Hey hey hey, what’s going on here? So you were with those Felix guys all along, Firo? Since the very beginning? Since you arrived?”

“No...actually, I joined forces with them only about ten or fifteen minutes ago,” Firo answered, and what had happened replayed in his mind.

Right before he had been brought down to Huey’s cell, the warden stopped abruptly on the stairs, and said, “Hm, there is a matter I need your help for, Mir. Prochainezo.”

“Oh c’mon, tell Huey that if he needs my help, then ask me himself.”

“No...it’s a personal request.”

At this unexpected turn, Firo looked at him suspiciously. “...?”

This warden, this loyal servant of Huey Laforet who had never wasted his breath, now looked at Firo in a completely different way and spoke in a completely different tone.

This weirded Firo out a little, but he was still on guard. “Okay, shoot.”

A self-deprecating smile surfaced on the warden’s face, and he looked away as though embarrassed. “Could you help me...no, help us...gouge out one of Master Huey’s eyes?”

“.....”

This one really came completely out of nowhere. After a moment of ringing silence between them, Firo looked at the warden with outright astonishment. “What do you mean?”

“Just as I said. And how about I also tell you who the assassin is?”

“...Huh?wait a moment, so in another words, You’ve...Huey’s been...um...”

“Betrayed. This word is indeed apt.” The warden’s tone was matter-of-fact, and there wasn’t any madness or malice in his eyes.

Firo changed course. “So...who the heck are you really?”

“Shared consciousness...and someone like you, who has Szilard’s memories, must understand the significance of that, right? Even though Master Huey picked up the research notes halfway through, but he was still the first one to get desired results, that’s all.”

“...!”

“I am Sham, and it’s very nice to meet you.”

He had a comforting smile on his face, and his voice was likewise soft, which was in stark contrast with his next words. “For the safety of Miss Ennis, and the average members in your Camorra family, may I suggest that you temporarily become a member of the Felix Walkens?”

--- Dammit, in the end I still yielded to his threats. --- It’s true that I don’t owe Huey anything, but still... --- What if the target of the Felix Walkens is the Don or Maiza or something? --- Or Isaac, or Czes...or the Gandors? --- Would I do it? --- I’m not worried about myself, but what about memories of old man Szilard inside my head?

Firo had retreated into his own thoughts in silence, and Ladd stepped towards him.

“Hey hey hey, if you go all quiet how am I supposed to figure this out? Don’t tell me killing someone put you in shock...never thought you’d be such a wimp! Hey!”

“No, but I just don’t know how to tell it right...”

Firo scratched his head with his free hand, while the other hand was clutched the eyeball that was still struggling to get back to Huey’s body.

He glanced down at this hand, and the moment his eyes and the eyeball met, a voice spoke out.

“We’ll take care of the story from here.”

There was really no cause and effect relationship between the two events, but the timing was uncanny.

“What...?”

Ladd and Firo turned to see that the Asian man, Dragon, who had been clobbered by Ladd moments earlier, was rising unsteadily to his feet. Unbelievably, after Dragon, The big African American man Klik also stood. His voice was similar to Dragon’s. “It was us, we had a difficult situation on our hands, and asked Firo for help.”

“What...?” Before Ladd could even summon a frown of confusion, the small Caucasian guy got up. “I think we’d better introduce ourselves again, Master Ladd Russo.”

“...Nah. How about you die again?” Ladd wasted no words and raised his fists, but then the small man chuckled.

“She’s called Lua, isn’t she? Quite a doll.”

“...!”

At this name, Ladd froze.

--- Lua? Is she Ladd's...

Firo started trying to figure out who this Lua was, before realizing that kind of threat was how they got himself in the first place, and his brows knitted in indignation.

“You bastards...how much you got on Lua?”

“Not much. We don't know what's going on inside her head at all...but we do know that her existence is one that we can end at any time...even...now.”

Ladd's eyes widened. A conflicted expression rose on his face, mixed with rage and surprise.

The small man chuckled again and opened his mouth. At the same time, the warden with the gun also spoke the exact same words.

“ ‘I would still like to introduce ourselves.’ ”

With each sentence, another man's voice joined in, as though they formed a bizarre choir. Or as though they were radios tuned to the same station.

“ ‘ [My name --- is Felix Walken...]’ ”

The team of assassins, whom Ladd had just killed, spoke in unearthly and menacing unison.

“ ‘ ([Or, according to the bigger picture, we shall ask you to call us Sham.])’ ”

The voices from each man had different timbers, as if they were a quartet.

Finally, the body of the warden who was lying outside also opened his mouth.

The five men, together as Sham of the Twins, politely turned to Ladd:

“ ‘ ([{It is an honour to meet you.}])’ ”

All right. As for what happened to them afterwards, I shall tell you in good time. Along with what occurred in Chicago, all in good time.

..... You have been rather quiet, Miss Hilton. Are you feeling all right?

Well, considering your hurt feelings at this moment, I suppose I shouldn't call you Hilton...but rather, Miss Leeza, aren't I right?

...from your expression, I can see that you have guessed the truth, though you refuse it with doubt.

I see, from your expression, you have decided to accept the truth.

A difficult matter, no? The beings manufactured by Huey Laforet cannot be guaranteed in their loyalty after all. But I suppose that is already evident from Rail, isn't it?

Ah, Rail...such a tragic young man.

Other than rebelling against his creator, he really has no other ways to assert his freedom. Perhaps he subconsciously understands this, thus he lost control and perpetrated that mass bombing incident.

...Don't look at me like that, Carol. I am paying him a compliment. Before he went mad, at least he was able to carve out his own world.

His fate has not yet reached my ears. Perhaps the President could tell me once we return to New York. Well, shall we pray for a happy ending then?

Whatever the case, even if Miss Hilton knows all of this now, it is too late.

Because everything is already over.

What looks to be coincidences to ordinary eyes may not be coincidences after all; I think you already understand this.

And you also seem to understand that even though you have only now seen the whole picture, perhaps it is not too late.

However, you still want me to continue –

Well, no harm telling you, I suppose.

I will now tell you about a pair whose calculations went up in smoke, who were torn apart, and how they were reunited.

And perhaps we can consider whether the conclusion they put into motion was a “coincidence.”

You know, piecing this information with what you already know should yield interesting results.

All right, so, where shall we begin?

A train arriving in Chicago would be a good starting point...

Or perhaps the mass bombing and the mass disappearances, and the commentary thereupon, would give you a more detailed picture...

Maybe the Joker of the deck, who were left behind in New York...

Or even the unfortunate couple, on their way to reunion, who were facing separation once more...Hm...that might be too far from the mark.

Actually it doesn't matter where we begin, because there is only one end.

And regardless of the order of our narrative, what facts amount to intelligence, and how these ultimately distill into truth, that is your responsibility.

This is the trouble with the organism known as intelligence, and it is also its greatest virtue.

So, shall we begin?

Let's start with the young lady, who knows nothing of the misfortune her parents faced, as she is left behind in New York ---

Extra Chapter: Towards the Bull's Eye

(Millionaire Row, New York)

Between the awe-inspiring mansion strolled a couple. But the way they were speaking – or not speaking – made observers cock their heads in puzzlement.

“So, Chane, you’re worried that eyepatch bastard is up to no good?”

“...”

“Is that so...but I don’t think stirring up Jacuzzi will get them anywhere...”

“...”

“Yep, that’s right...even if they make no moves, your father’s underlings would still put Jacuzzi’s bunch through the grinder somehow.”

The woman – Chane Laforet – nodded, and the man – “Vino”/Felix Walken/Claire Stanfield – was walking side by side, and he looked sidelong at her to observe her expression.

Chane never uttered a word, and didn’t look like she was using sign language or writing to communicate, yet Vino chatted with her naturally, as though he could read her mind.

To any passers-by, it looked as though a very quiet woman was on the receiving end of a rant about all the man’s extravagant hopes and dreams, and the atmosphere around them was peculiar.

“So that’s it...after their entanglements last year, they’ve probably been designated as research subjects too...”

“...”

“Don’t worry, he’s your father, so he should understand. Chane still likes her father, right?”

“...”

“Then there’s no problem, is there?”

“Hey, by the way, between me and your dad, who d’you like more you think?”

“.....!”

“Sorry sorry, don’t say that. I didn’t think my little spark of curiosity would get such a scolding from you. To be honest with you...that kind of hurt.”

“...”

“Thanks. You’re really tender too.”

On Vino’s face lingered a childlike smile, and without any further words, kept walking.

As they stepped on the road in front of Madison Square Gardens, which lead to the Genoard mansion, Chane's anxious face betrayed her stoic silence.

She had just been ambushed by the Blacksuits, and her erstwhile comrade Spike had thus interrogate her: "What research is your dad after anyway?"

And then, the "former" Felix Walken had shown up, pulled her into an intense battle, and finally Vino had entered the fray and helped extract her from it. And then, Chane, who was worried about her companions, started hurrying back to the mansion to make sure that everyone was all right.

"Yep, no need to worry. I'll keep them safe."

The two arrived at 5th Avenue, or Millionaire's Row, and approached house that was sumptuously decorated but still homey.

"That's right, because the things that are important to you are important to me too...ha, that was a little corny, wasn't it? Please don't tell anyone I said that."

"..."

Chane blushed and nodded, and Vino nodded with satisfaction, and turned and pushed open the mansion's front door.

"So, gang, how's -"

"..."

His cheerful greeting suddenly stopped, and Chane's eyes widened as her body tensed. There was no one there.

All that was before their eyes was an empty hallway. You could hear a pin drop.

The situation that greeted them might have been normal in any other household, but this mansion wasn't an ordinary household, because there were supposed to be thirty or so delinquents living there.

Normally there'd be about five members of Jacuzzi's gang loitering around the hallway entrance alone, but today there was not a soul to be seen.

"...did they go out?"

"..."

Vino gently put his arms around Chane before going outside and pressing the doorbell.

RIIIIIIIIING. RIIIIIIIIING.

After the bell had rung several times, two men emerged from the shadows at the end of the hallway.

"Hey, its Master Walken and Chane. What's up?"

"What happened? The date over already?"

The pair was the Irish Johan and the Chinese Huang, looked at Vino and Chane in askance.

Seeing Johan and Huang's everyday expressions made Vino breathe a sigh of relief, but his mind quickly turned to the absent Jacuzzi Splot. "Hey, so you're here after all...where's Jacuzzi? And everyone else?"

At this, Huang and Johan's faces clouded over, and they glanced at one another.

"Well...he's really something. You know how Miria's boyfriend is that Isaac guy? Apparently he was released from prison yesterday or today, or something like that."

"And no idea why, but apparently he decided not to take the train back."

"So then Miria got his phone call, and went to send his money to Chicago."

Isaac and Miria.

This couple, who certainly had more than one screw loose, often showed up at the mansion.

Vino didn't have much to do with them, but upon hearing this news, Chane's eyes widened in surprise. Vino saw her reaction and helped express her thoughts. "Really...that's wonderful. See, Chane thinks this is good news too."

"Yes, because Chane's become good friends with Miria recently."

"Um...yes, very good news...but..."

Vino only had half the story so far, and launched into his next question, which was also Chane's question. "So how come Jacuzzi left too?"

"..."

Seeing Huang and Johan look at each other darkly, Vino said with some trepidation, "Um...so you mean other than the two of you...everyone else went too?"

The next day, Union Station, Chicago

The train that was pulling into Chicago did so under an air of unaccustomed tension.

The chain of bombing incidents in the neighbouring Elson Hill, as well as the mass disappearances numbering 200 in Chicago itself –

As the centre of two national incidents, Chicago was under the same kind of atmosphere as during the great fires sixty three years ago, and there was such tightly held tension that even wind stirring a blade of grass could incite mass pandemonium.

No one could be trusted, not even the familiar faces one saw everyday.

It was likely that there was more than one perpetrator for these incidents, so suspicions hung thickly, and it manifested even more so against new arrivals.

And so now –

A girl who obviously couldn't read the atmosphere scampered off the train with a cheerful call.

“Isaac...!”

Unfortunately, her voice dissipated into the station crowd.

Even though she got no response, she was still turning and craning her neck in an effort to find her beloved.

The person exiting the train after her took in her behaviour. This person was a remarkable looking woman with a pair of glasses perched on her nose. “Miria, he’s not here yet. The train from San Francisco won’t be arriving til tomorrow or the day after.”

“Yes I know...but when I think that he might have arrived, I couldn’t help feeling an urge to call out his name!”

As Miria said so, he continued to turn in circles, as if she wanted to scatter the seeds of her cheer all around.

Twenty or so noisy youths descended the train next, as though to provide Miria’s exuberance with an audience. The platform was instantly engulfed in cheerful chaos.

“Wow, talk about nostalgic...unbelievable...”

“Hyaha!” “Hoorah!”

“Wow, long time no see...I’ve totally missed how this city smells.”

“We’ve arrived! Arrived!” “Heavens, Chicago hasn’t changed at all. Still crappy!”

“Wooooo...” “Quiet. Let’s put the station behind us and then you can ooo-ahh all you want.”

The young men and women took turns expressing their opinion, and didn’t look scared in the slightest – except for one young man still hanging behind the compartment door, glancing nervously from side to side.

“Hey, Jacuzzi, whatcha doin’?”

The young man behind the door, who had a tattoo on his face, seemed to quiver at the voice of his companion, and waved nervously. “W-wait a sec! D-d-don’t do that! Don’t yell my name so loud! W-what if someone from the Russo family hears?”

In fact, they were all native Chicagoans. The terrified young man, Jacuzzi Splot, had left for New York because of entanglements with the Russo family. His gang of delinquents followed him there, and had been living there since.

Their return hadn’t been planned at all, but then they heard about the bombings on the radio, and received the call from Isaac saying he would meet Miria in Chicago. Jacuzzi had tried to stop Miria from going, saying “Going to Chicago now would be really, really dangerous!” – but to no avail.

In fact, Jacuzzi himself was worried about Graham, who was in Chicago, and Nice had said, “I really want to know what’s at the bottom of those bombings...” This initiated a chorus from the rest of the gang. “Then I’m going too.” “Me too.” “We’d worry if Jacuzzi went alone.” “And yeah, my laundry’s actually still hanging at my house there. Need to go and bring it in.” “My intuition tells me that my little sister’s sick. So I need to go back too.” “Bullshit, you have no sister!” “Dammit, it’s about time we settle things with the Russos.” “Hyaha!” – etc.

Their exuberance had managed to drown out Jacuzzi’s senses, and the next thing he knew, he’d already left the house and bought train tickets.

It was only after everyone had, willy-nilly, mounted the train when Jacuzzi realized the danger he was rushing headlong towards. Words from his gang didn't help, and he spent the rest of the trip trembling.

"Don't worry. We heard on the radio, right? For some reason the cops are after the Russo family now, so they'd hardly spare time for you!"

But Jacuzzi shook his head violently and looked back with his eyes filled with tears. "But who knows for sure? Maybe the Russo family know it's the end and wants to drag me down with them..."

"Heh, small fry like you? It won't be worth their effort. Don't flatter yourself."

"Hey, that's too much!"

"Okay, okay, get off the train first and then we'll discuss this, all right? Or do you want to be towed back to the west coast?"

Jacuzzi couldn't tell whether they were being serious or making fun of him, and descended from the train with some trepidation.

But his feet had scarcely touched the platform before a man rushed by and knocked him over.

"Out – out of the way!"

He wasn't apologetic at all, but rather cursed and sprang into the compartment that Jacuzzi had just left.

"Huh? S-sorry! I'm sorry!"

Jacuzzi began to apologize even though he wasn't at fault. But Nice, who had seen everything, said in a tight voice, "Jacuzzi."

"Wh-what? Nice? What is it?"

"That man just now – wasn't he a member of the Russo family?"

"...Finally got a breather..."

Having finally gotten on the train, Klik let out a big sigh of relief.

He leaned against the side of the train passage, recalling what a narrow escape he made.

After the incidents that erupted, he had distinctively seen his boss being "devoured" by the woman in the lab coat, and scampered as fast as he could out of the Russo manor.

He had been on the run for whole day and a whole night, skulking in darkness and watching for the police and other pursuers. Finally, after making sure he had shaken them off his trail, he bought a ticket for the transcontinental railway and got on the train.

"Dammit...what the hell was all that about...never heard of such a thing..."

The image of his companions' bodies being sucked into the woman's pale, thin arm made Klik' body involuntarily tense up. He didn't know what happened to either the woman's hand or his companions' bodies, but one thing for sure – they were dead.

Fear clutched him, and he looked at his surroundings with suspicion. "Right...can't let my guard down til this train pulls out..."

Intent on his thoughts of escape, Klik turned to enter the compartment –

And saw the palm of someone's hand.

Between the pale and shapely fingers, he saw a pair of glasses, and a childlike smile materialize under those glasses.

And that was the last thing Klik ever saw.

"Huh? What...?"

Jacuzzi, who had gotten back on the train to ascertain that it was indeed a Russo member, looked left and right, but Klik didn't seem to be anywhere at all.

"Where did he go..."

As he was looking around, his eyes met those of a woman in a white lab coat.

--- a doctor?

A thought flashed through Jacuzzi's mind – how could there be a doctor here? But then the woman immediately started to scream.

"Ah? S-sorry! Totally sorry! Please forgive me!"

"Huh?"

Jacuzzi thought that the woman must be scared of the tattoo on his face and waved his hands frantically, as though to dispel the misunderstanding. "I-I'm sorry! You've got it wrong! I'm not a robber or anything. Um, well, I have robbed trains...but not right now though! Um, that is, I was just, just looking for a man with a scar on his face, I think he just got on the train! But then there's no one here! P-please, did you see anyone like that? Sorry, I apologize!"

The fact that Jacuzzi was spilling all of his beans seemed to make the woman calmer. "Huh? Yes, he was here a moment ago, but I don't know where he went."

"Is-is that so....sorry again, and thank you!"

Jacuzzi thought it would be better to stop questioning her, and so he bowed and left to join with his companions on the platform.

As he descended from the train, his face betrayed his anxiety.

Renée watched his back disappear and looked down at her right hand in thought.

“Well, it’s true, who knows where bodies go?”

So she had not really lied to Jacuzzi.

As she mentally thumbed through the memories of the man she had just devoured, she pondered where the bodies really went.

“...to Hell?”

This struck her as a stupid answer. She folded her hands, thinking that perhaps absorbing that man’s knowledge had in fact dimmed her own intelligence.

She continued to ponder the whereabouts of the body, before deciding that an answer wouldn’t come. She gave a big sigh and left the train.

“If it was Mr. Huey, maybe then I’d have an answer!” Then she lowered her voice so that no one would hear. “Wow – I can’t wait! Mr. Huey’s eyeball will be delivered soon...”

She sounded like a child waiting for a Christmas present, but her tone could not mask the creepiness of what she had said.

Renée stood on the platform and looked up at the blue Chicago sky. The sun’s rays reached everything and bathed the skyscrapers of Chicago in gold.

Today, as every other day, the sun presented the city and its inhabitants a changeless blue sky, composing a crisp and dazzling scene.

Meanwhile, Miria was also looking up at the sky, and speaking in a similar cheerful voice.

“I really hope I can see Isaac soon!”

Her voice seemed to carry beyond the station into the skies of Chicago, into the horizon, as though it could sweep away all the fear and tension from city.

But, as though to herald fresh disasters to come, as though in defiance of the even blue sky –

A new wave of explosions rocked the city of Chicago.